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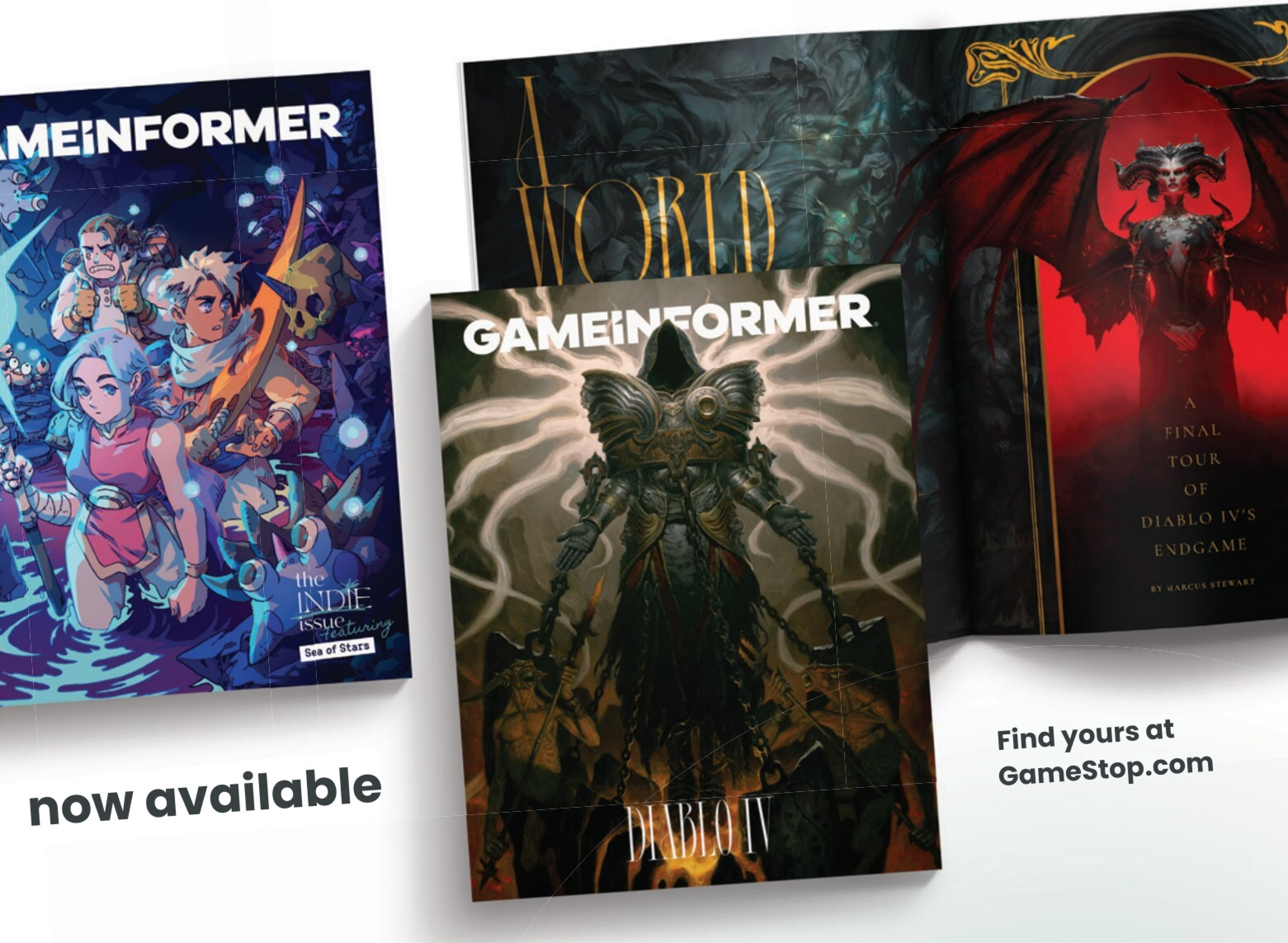
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EDITOR'S NOTE

SHIFTING CYCLES

MATT MILLER
Editor-In-Chief

IT'S A GIVEN THAT WE'RE ALWAYS LOOKING INTO EXCITING ANGLES AND PERSPECTIVES to share about video games, the people who make them, and the culture surrounding them. Games are more fun when you get where they come from and how they're informed by their design philosophies and the developers' backgrounds. Or, to put it another way, games are better when you understand them.

That's a belief shared across the team at *Game Informer* and a continuation of the work of writers and creators that have made up GI's 30-plus-year history. But even if that goal remains the same, no doubt much has changed in how folks communicate about games – including the internal teams tasked with sharing information.

Fifteen years ago, our cover stories, features, and articles typically focused on games that were sometimes many months, if not years, from release. Publishers were often eager to share details as early as possible, aiming to capture mindshare in an incredibly crowded landscape.

Today, fewer publishers are releasing high-profile triple-A games. The number of triple-A games that come out yearly has also shrunk, even though many's scope and expected shelf life have expanded. Concurrently, while some game announcements still sneak out far ahead of launch, most teams hold their cards close to the chest on a project until a game is nearing launch. Coverage cycles are often much shorter, with narrower windows to reach out and speak to developers, play early builds, or offer impressions.

Reconciling our goal of offering insight into game development against those much tighter coverage windows is a big challenge, but it's not one we've shied away from. Each month, our team seeks opportunities to feature some of the biggest and most intriguing games on the horizon and look for exclusive access, art, and impressions that we can share with anyone who picks up the magazine.

When we know a game is close to launching, we specifically try and highlight details and perspectives that enrich a player's experience with the game they might soon be playing. We talk to developers before and after about the details we want to know as players ourselves. And we continue to look to expand the conversation about who is playing games, where they're playing them, and what games mean to all sorts of people.

I hope you enjoy what we've put together this month, from the exciting prospect of the newest 2D Sonic game (p. 28) to insight into the gaming scene in Nigeria (p. 10), to our profile on developer John Johanas after the success of Hi-Fi Rush (p. 18). Thanks for joining us.

Play well. Be well.

SONIC SUPERSTARS

This month's cover image depicts the heroes of Sonic Superstars standing in the spotlight with Sonic holding the green Chaos Emerald, emphasizing the new Emerald Powers introduced in this entry. The art was created by Mark Hughes, who has done work for both IDW Comics and Sega, including the reversible cover for the physical version of Sonic Superstars.

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Finally canceled Netflix. Regrets nothing

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Really crushin' on jerboas (see p. 84)

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Next dog will be named Torgal. Best boy

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Doesn't help tired Koroks find their friends

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STAFF SPOTLIGHT

Brian Shea

Online Content Director

In my earliest days, Nintendo was all I knew. The SNES was my first console, and Super Mario World was my first love. But when we moved and my SNES was accidentally packed away for months, I discovered something new. That was Sonic the Hedgehog, and it quickly became my obsession. Sonic 2 on Genesis was my starting point, but Sonic 3 & Knuckles might forever be my favorite entry. Sonic Superstars feels like a return to those early days, and I'm so happy to have written this month's cover story on that very game.

Alex Van Aken

Video Editor

If you follow me on social media, you know I'm learning to develop small 3D games in the Unity engine. My efforts thus far have focused on learning scripting in C#, converting my art concepts into game-ready 3D models, and mulling over design documents. For the last few months, I've focused on developing a short first-person shooter with a central hookshot mechanic. I love creating my little game world, and I hope you can explore it someday.

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spotlight

28 **COVER STORY – SONIC SUPERSTARS**

Following Sonic Mania's retro success, Sonic Superstars carries the torch forward with modern graphics and new powers. We spent hours with the first half of the game and talked to the developers to learn about this exciting side-scroller.

10 **THE STATE OF GAMING IN NIGERIA**

Nigeria has the largest economy in Africa, with plenty of video game fans to boot. But the city's burgeoning game industry is not without its challenges. We talked to players and community organizers about what's going on.

18 **FULL CIRCLE**

From Long Island, NY to Tokyo and from playing in a Radiohead cover band to directing Hi-Fi Rush, John Johanas has one of the more unique careers in the game industry. We caught up with him in Japan to get the full story.

40 **THE MUSICAL WITH MILLIONS OF ENDINGS**

Stray Gods has millions of different endings. If that number made your eyebrows raise, read on to learn about the shockingly slap-dash way this ambitious musical adventure is coming together.

78 **ODD ORIGINS**

The Famicom (known as the NES in America) is turning 40. What better way to celebrate than to look back at its often very, very weird history?

regulars

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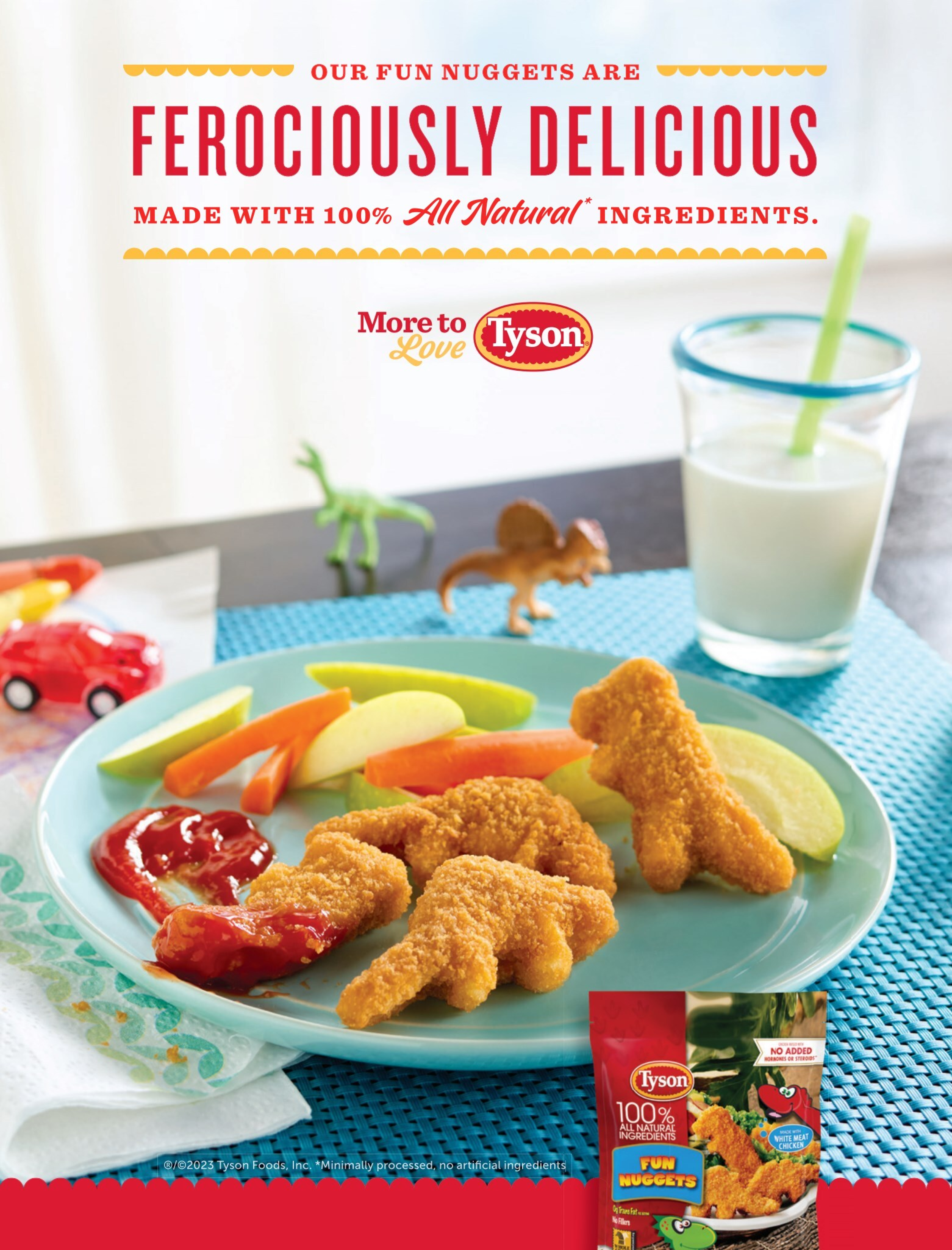
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Replies

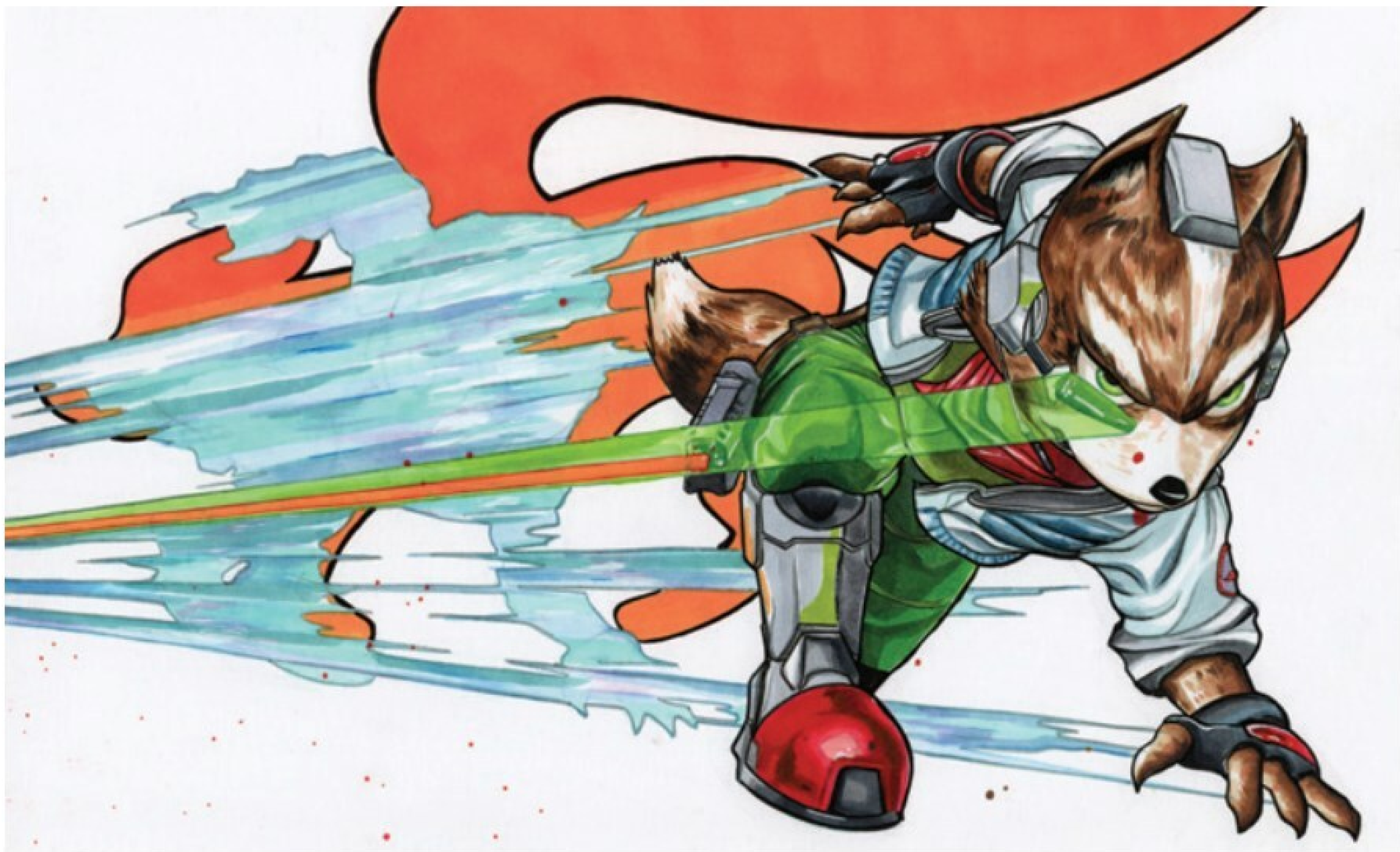
HANDHELDS AND HYBRIDS

I haven't seen a ton of mention of the Steam Deck in your pages (at least since it first came out), probably because it's not a full-fledged console so much as a portable PC, but wanted to give it a special shout out having now owned mine for over a year. I am married with a two-year-old daughter, living in an 1,100 square foot condo. We have one TV – which we don't turn on while she's awake – and absolutely no room for a gaming PC (my "office" is our couch on the rare instances I'm forced to work from home).

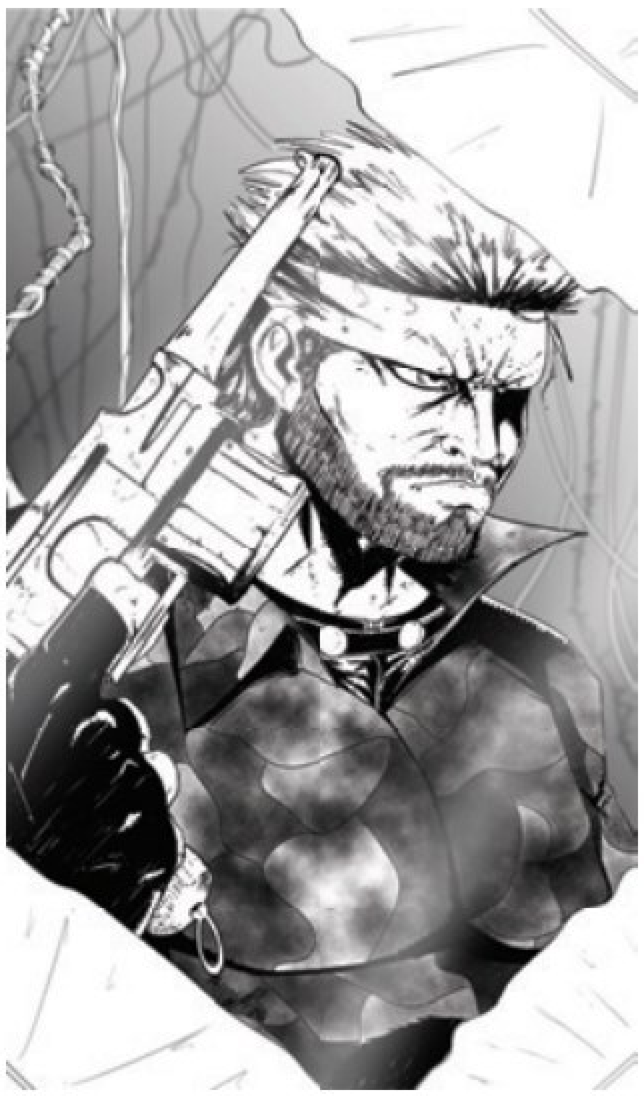
I don't want to monopolize the TV after our daughter goes to bed with hours of console gaming, especially when my wife wants to watch something. Enter: Steam Deck. This has been the single greatest gaming purchase I have made in recent memory, allowing me to play everything from triple-A games (Marvel's Midnight Suns, Middle Earth: Shadow of War/Mordor) to hidden indie gems (Stray, Against the Storm), in the palm of my hands. If you already have a portable console, e.g. Switch, and a gaming rig or current gen console, then it probably doesn't fill any particular need you have. However, if you're like me and don't have physical space for those but still want to pursue your gaming hobby, then I cannot recommend the Steam Deck enough.
– Jake via email

↳ *The Switch and Steam Deck have been game-changers for many, whether they're traveling or trying to avoid taking up the family television. The Steam Deck benefits from the fact that it is, well, Steam-powered, and therefore has the largest gaming library possible and some of the best digital sales on the market. Meanwhile, the Switch features an unrivaled suite of Nintendo games, which includes everything from hardcore titles like The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom and Xenoblade Chronicles 3 to family-friendly games like Mario Kart 8 Deluxe and Animal Crossing: New Horizons.*

Though there are certainly drawbacks to the hybrid form factor (particularly on the six-year-old Switch side of this equation), it's hard to imagine going back to a purely home-console platform with whatever Nintendo has next. On the Steam Deck side, its current version seems like just the start of a very popular way to enjoy your Steam library, and we can't wait to see what future iterations of this hardware look like. The first attempt already feels like a home run, and it should only get better from here!



Reader art submission: James Rafael



Reader art submission: Gabe Harris

Reader art submission: Christopher Massie

Reader art submission: James LaFleur, age 9

Soundoff: Anticipated Upcoming Releases

We asked our readers and community which game they're most looking forward to in the second half of 2023. Here are some of their responses!

Super Mario Bros. Wonder! Looks like Nintendo listened to feedback on their 2D Mario games and have injected some of that creativity we've seen in the new Donkey Kong Country games. **– PoorAndCurly via Discord**

Alan Wake 2. It's Remedy we are talking about. Amazing stories, engaging gameplay, outstanding visuals is what they have constantly delivered with every title they release. **– via Instagram**

Insomniac's Spider-Man 2, followed by Starfield. If they both are as good to play as they look then this year will go down as one of the greats.
– SnakeEater1964 via Discord

I'm pretty hyped for Armored Core VI and Baldur's Gate 3. Of course, Spider-Man 2, as well. Such a great year for gaming. **– Acekilik via Discord**

While I'm excited for so many games coming out, I'm more excited to play the game, "How the heck am I going to find the time to play all of these games?"
– LegendofGamer102 via Discord

The Pulse

We asked the community what they've been playing over the last month and have compiled power rankings of the current hottest games among our readers.

1. Final Fantasy XVI NEW
2. The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom ▼ 1
3. Diablo IV ▼ 1
4. Red Dead Redemption 2
5. Street Fighter 6 ▼ 2
6. Elden Ring
7. Humanity
8. The Legend of Heroes: Trails in Reverie NEW
9. AEW: Fight Forever NEW
10. Marvel Snap

AN INDUSTRY IN DECLINE?

Is it just me, or has the quality of games over the past decade gone way downhill? I mean, don't get me wrong, we have had some truly amazing games recently and over the past few years, but it seems like ever since the Xbox One and PS4 came out, we have had more bad games than good ones. Take the Halo franchise for example, ever since Bungie left the scene and 343 took over, none of the new Halo games have even been close to as good as Halo Reach and Halo 3. Another example would be the Call of Duty franchise. I mean, remember Black Ops 1 through 3 and Modern Warfare 1 through 3? Arguably the best Call of Duty games ever, right?

Now, look what we have: crappy remasters and even worse sequels that are turning longtime fans off. My final example would be Forza Horizon 5. It had the largest player base for a game launch in Xbox history. And shortly after launch, that player base went way down, and now only a small percentage of people still play the game. I don't even need to talk about the disasters that were Redfall and The Last of Us for PC, because I am sure you are aware of those major trash heaps. So, my question is this: Why is almost every new game never as good as any of the older games, despite our major technological advancements? **– Logan via email**

↳ *It certainly isn't just you in thinking this way, but we'd also argue that this line of thinking focuses too much on the negatives of today and while looking at yesteryear through rose-tinted glasses. Of course, there have been some bad or underwhelming games that have hit the market in recent years; it's safe to say that many were disappointed by Redfall, as you pointed out. It's also clear that some of the best games of various franchises (you mention Halo and Call of Duty), came out a decade or more ago. But that's not the full picture of the industry. Ten years ago, you had people sharing this exact sentiment, but framed around 2003 instead of 2013. Meanwhile, look at all the incredible experiences we've received in the last five years; 2023 alone is shaping up to be downright incredible for games, even when you factor in the bad games that also arrived this year. It's always easy to look in the past and think it's the good ol' days, but it's also entirely possible that one day, you'll look back at today in that same way.*

↘
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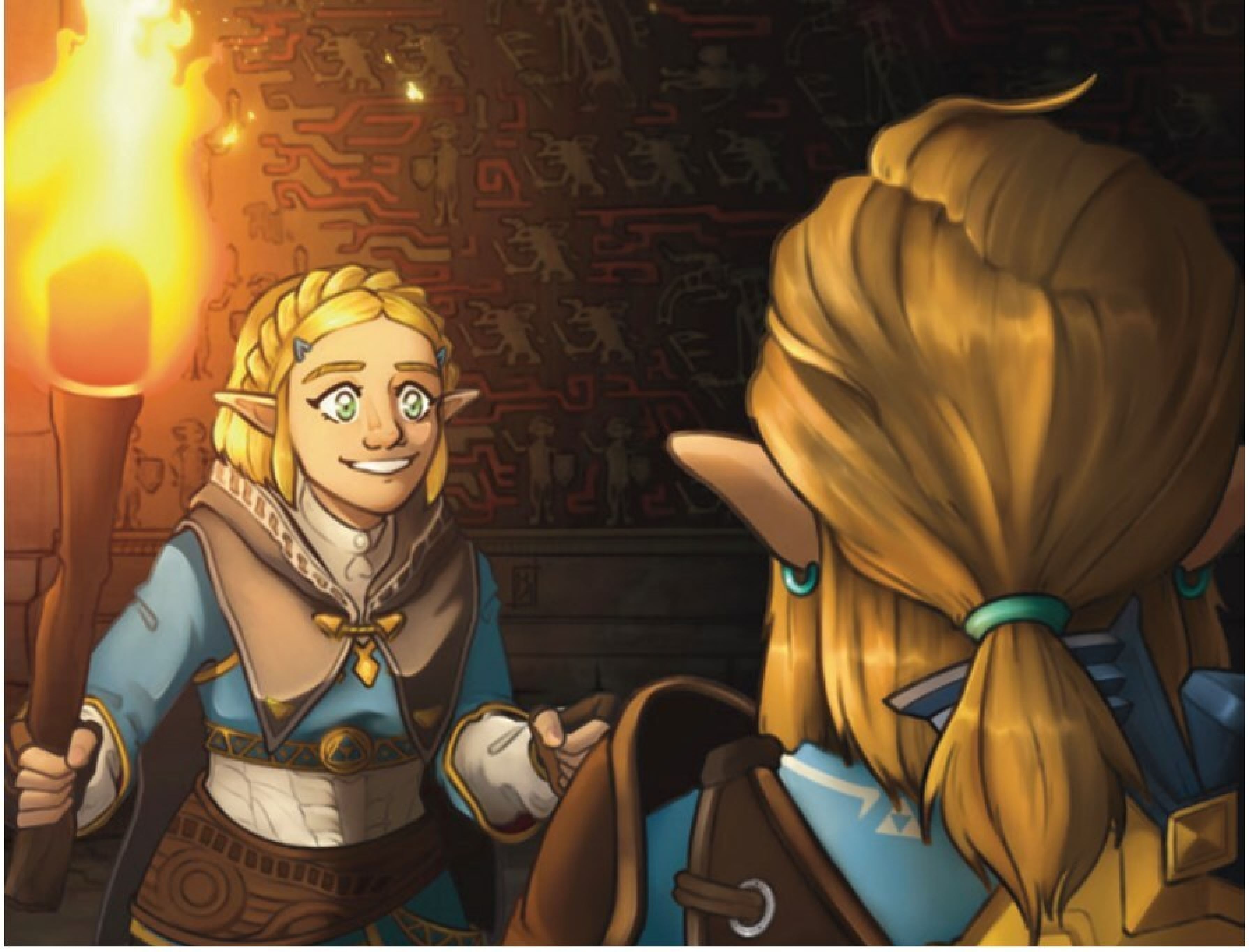

Reader art submission: Daytona Lee

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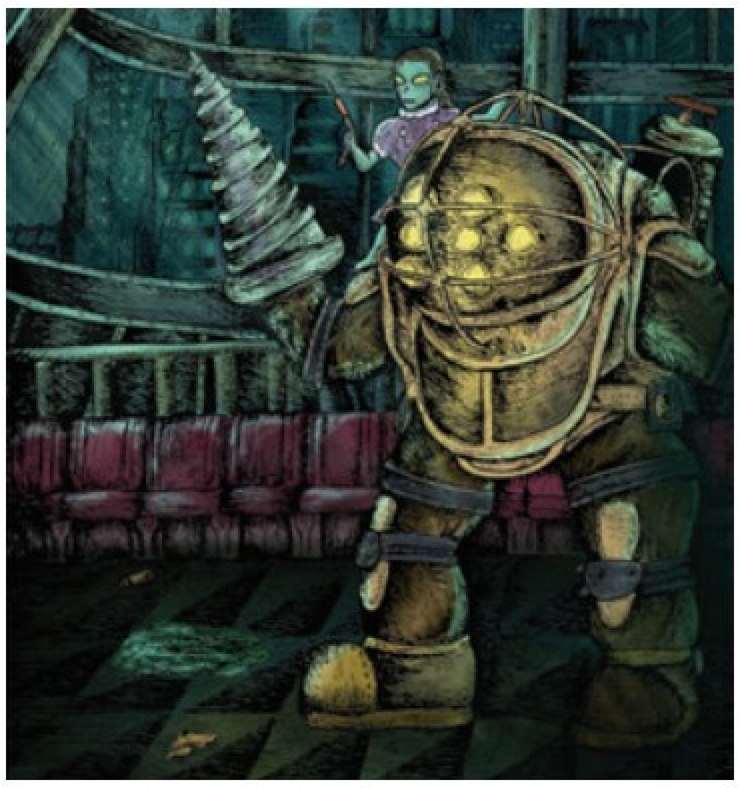
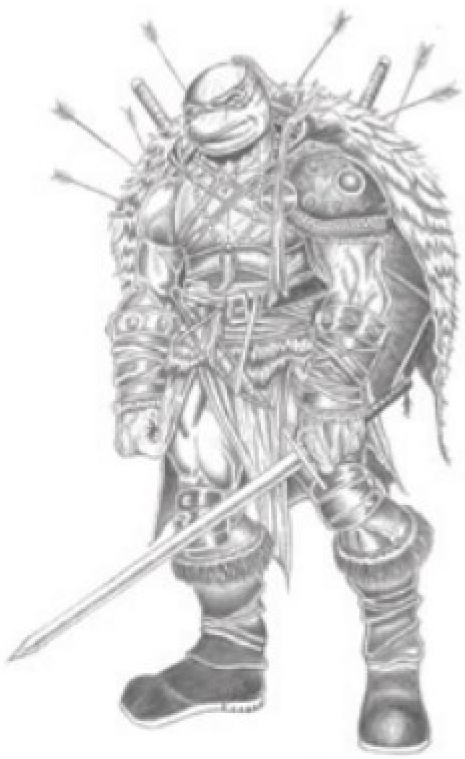
Please include your name and email address. Submissions may be showcased in our magazine and/or on social media, and become the property of *Game Informer*. Email to: ReaderArt@GameInformer.com



Reader art submission: Tanner Arnett

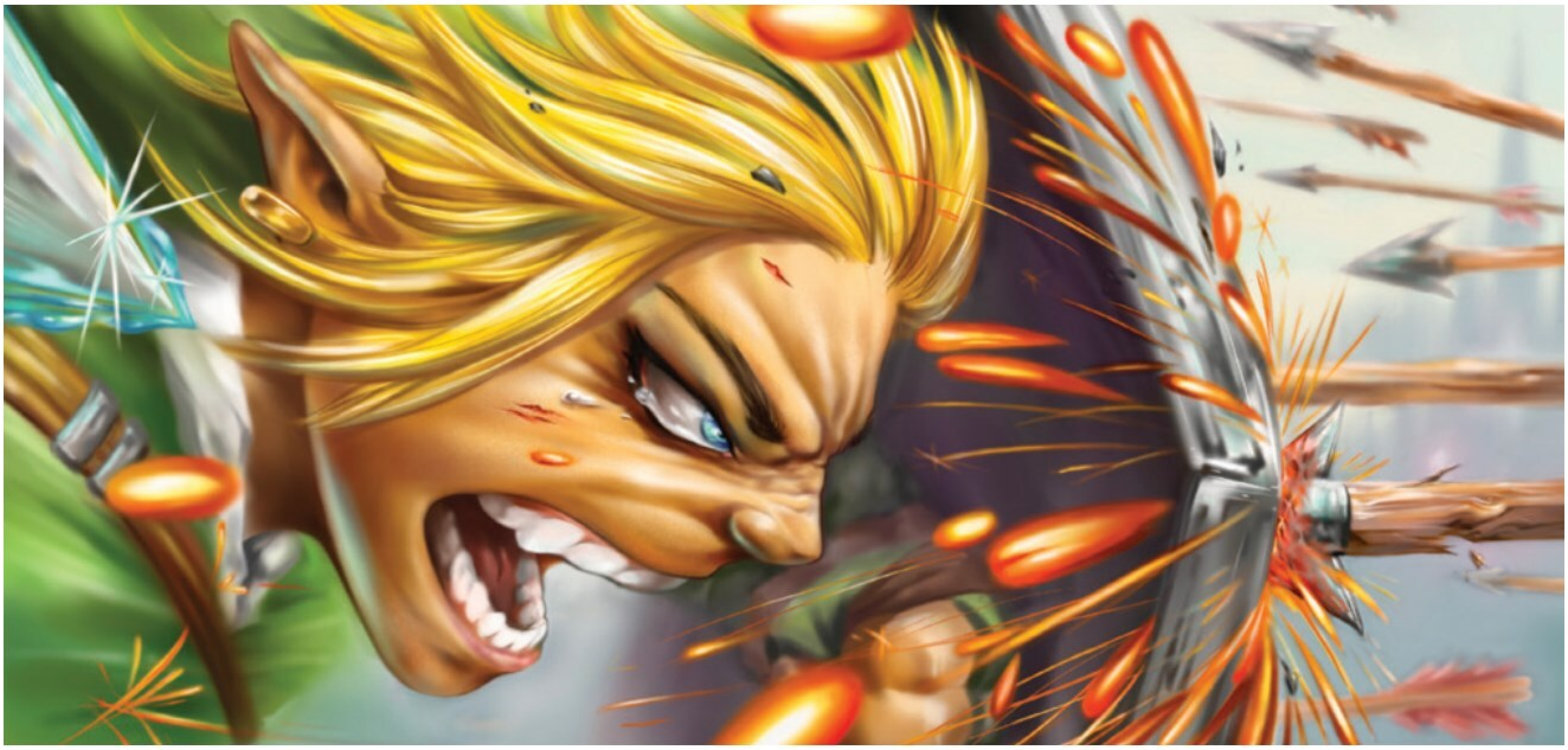


Reader art submission: Duane Klein

STAY AWHILE AND LISTEN

I am a 60-year-old guy who is still into video games. We have all seen great advances, but what about all that we have heard! The audio tracks in games today are amazing. From the music, which accompanies a great story, to the sound effects, which strengthen the unbelievable graphics. Audio engineers don't get enough credit. So, here's some recognition for the people who take gaming to the next level with all of their efforts in the audio space. Well done! **– Sam via email**

↳ *It's true that the flashiest way to show off a new game on powerful hardware is through dazzling graphics or silky-smooth performance, but the advancements made on the audio side of the equation deserve just as much praise. Not only do sound effects deliver the most realistic audio we've ever heard, but voice acting has also taken a massive leap forward over the last 20 years. Video game music has always been great, but it's amazing to hear composers continue to push the medium forward in such astounding ways. Yes, every member of a development team is important to a game's success, but don't forget the unbelievable importance of the folks behind the audio that makes the biggest moments of our favorite games hit that much harder.*



Reader art winner: Jose A. Perez

GI SPY

Each month, we attend events and visit developers getting information on the hottest games. Check out some of our latest photos from around the industry.

1

2

3

4

5

1.

While in Los Angeles for Summer Game Fest, Alex appeared on *Giant Bomb at Nite* alongside *Indie Informer* editor-in-chief (and former *Game Informer* editor) Jill Grodt

2.

After checking out a private demo of Alan Wake 2, we caught up with co-directors Sam Lake and Kyle Rowley

3.

Brian got in a quick Wild Card Football gaming session with former NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick. You can read his hands-on impressions on p. 58

4.

If Blake strikes you as the kind of guy who stares longingly at a waterfall in the middle of the Japanese forest, you would be correct

5.

For a guy who has made a career out of killing iconic video game characters in the most gruesome ways possible, Mortal Kombat co-creator Ed Boon is a shockingly nice guy. Read our preview of Mortal Kombat 1 on p. 48 ■

Inside the trials of building a thriving local industry **BY DEMI PHILLIPS**

THE STATE OF GAMING IN NIG

Nigeria has a staggering population of over 200 million people. About 70% of that number is under the age of 30. As the largest economy in Africa, it's no wonder many industries have recorded significant growth in the last two decades, and the game industry is one of these beneficiaries.

While still on the rise, gaming culture in Nigeria has been greatly propelled thanks to easier access to smartphones, tablets, laptops, and of course, the internet. Before these technological advancements, however, gaming was only available to the middle and upper class or through communal endeavors – the latter spurring the rise of "gaming centers" nationwide in the 2000s and 2010s.

Nigeria's relationship with gaming has always had ups and downs. While the aforementioned gaming centers offered many the chance to live out their fantasies as Lionel Messi in the latest FIFA and Pro Evolution Soccer (PES) or battle against gods as Kratos in God of War, it became difficult to maintain many of these venues because of Nigeria's failing currency, the Naira.

Professional gamer "Mr. Phillips" (who asked us not to print his real name, as he games anonymously) earns money competing in online tournaments around the world. He believes while the gaming industry in Nigeria is on a fast rise, it's still yet to thrive and continues to rely heavily on individual and not group or communal interests. In the wake of gaming competitions across the country, lack of sponsorships are now the order of the day, and professional gamers are more willing to engage in foreign tournaments over the internet than in-person contests. Phillips insists that the disappointing number of Nigerians on platforms like Twitch and Discord also contributes to the lack of communal gaming endeavors.

"I would go as far as saying that the industry is still in its infancy in terms of becoming a widespread phenomenon in Nigeria," Phillips says. "Competitions receive very little publicity, and I know a couple of contest winners who have yet to be paid their winnings. This is often due to a disappointing number of people registering and paying to enter many of these contests. You'll hardly find a hoard of Nigerians on Twitch and Discord, so uniting with fellow gamers in the country is quite difficult. YouTube is the primary option for gaming content, and with many more streamers and gamers heading towards other platforms, building a community is no easy feat."

ERIA

GAMR AFRICA'S ROLE IN PROMOTING GAMING CULTURE IN NIGERIA

GAMR Africa is the number one landing place for a gaming experience in Nigeria. The company has successfully provided players with the tools to excel in Africa's rising esports industry. So far, GAMR has welcomed over 210,000 new and experienced players, offering an interactive platform for them to grow and thrive while aiming for a huge break into the global scene.

Even though it recently adopted the moniker, GAMR has been flying the gaming flag high in Nigeria for over a decade. The brand's existence goes as far back as 2006 and, along the lines, morphed into the popular "Naija Game Evolution" before settling into what it is today. GAMR was co-founded by Eniola Edun, who serves as the chief executive officer; Oluwaseyi Fakoya, the chief technology officer; and Kunmi Adenipebi, the chief operation officer.

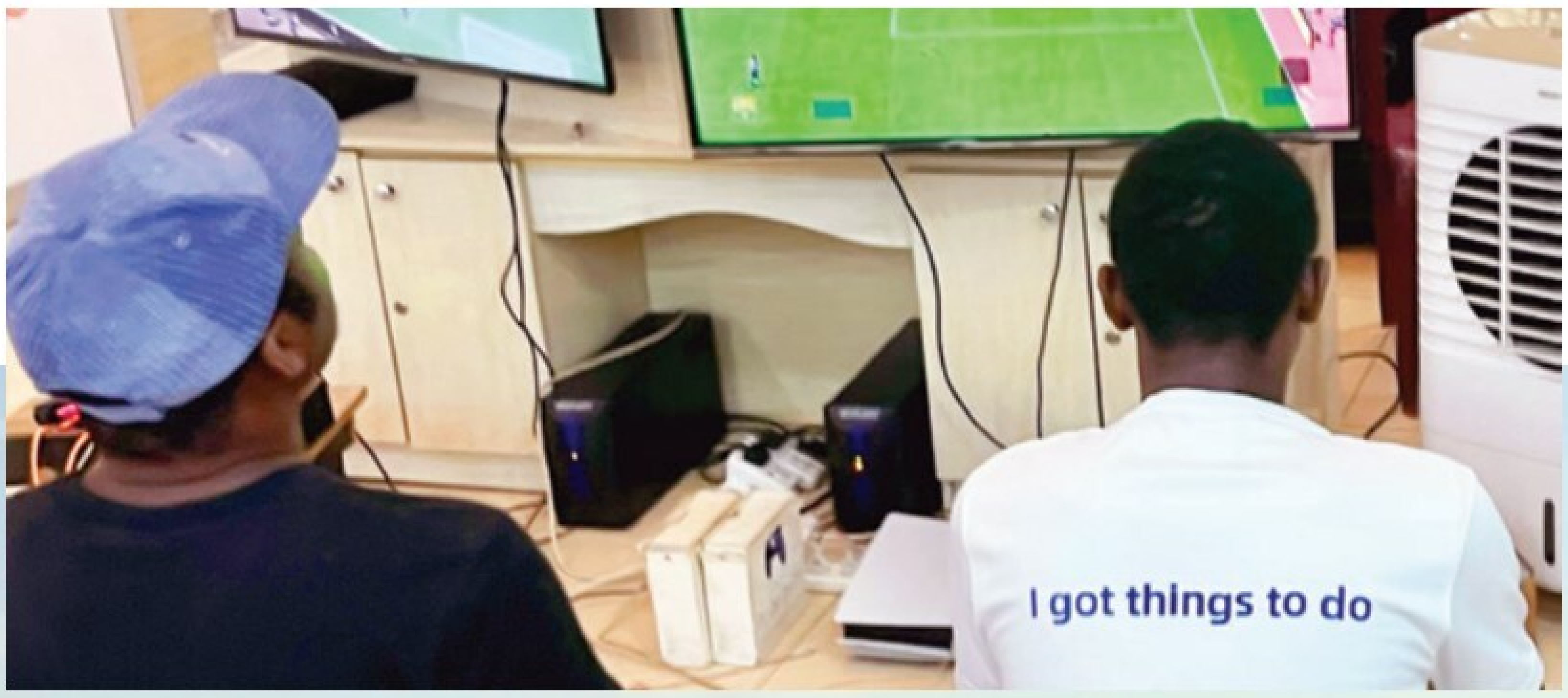
According to Adenipebi, GAMR exists as a structure that "serves to create opportunities for the gaming ecosystem to grow," enabling gamers to have a career path in the country and use their skills to earn a living.

"We work closely with game developers, professional esports players, streamers, and game testers to give Nigerians the exposure of something that has been looked down on for decades," Adenipebi says. "Once upon a time, soccer was viewed by African parents as a leisure pastime and not a career. Today, however, you find parents enrolling their kids in one academy or the other because it has become such a lucrative endeavor. That's what we believe can be the future of gaming in Nigeria. Someday, parents will be actively involved in their kids' gaming passions and encourage them to turn it into something that brings in money."

As a Bachelor's degree holder, Kunmi strongly believes in Education. While championing esports in Nigeria, he has begun working with many secondary schools to provide extracurricular gaming activities for students, serving as an avenue for them to maintain focus on schoolwork while introducing them to the gaming world. As of 2023, GAMR already has a representative in Ghana and a growing followership in 13 African countries.

"The older generation [has] a hard time understanding gaming as an important part of many lives, which is why we try to sanitize the minds of parents, guardians, and those in the workforce," Adenipebi continues. "Besides working with secondary schools, we partner with select companies to hold STEM events alongside coding classes for those interested."

Photos by author Demi Phillips ↖


I got things to do

ONLINE GAMING

Online gaming in Nigeria has its challenges. Restrictions on foreign transactions sometimes mean gamers cannot engage in online tournaments, leaving many with free-to-play games or downloadable-only content.

Ayomide Ariyo is a Nigerian leisure gamer who has difficulty purchasing video games online, thanks to Nigeria's newly introduced law that no foreign transactions can be conducted with the Nigerian Naira. It was a long and tiresome process before he could acquire an ATM card strictly for foreign currency, and while he missed out on several online tournaments, he's just now getting back into the groove of online gaming.

"Countries all over the world are free to engage in foreign transactions, with their currency exchanged to that of the product sold (usually Dollars)," Ariyo says. "With this new ban, there are several hurdles now present that put a serious strain on purchasing mods, add-ons, and even other games online. A few months ago, I could sit back and make gaming purchases knowing that my local bank would exchange the Naira for the Dollar, and I'd be charged in my home currency. Now, myself and other dedicated gamers have to endure the long process of opening domiciliary accounts and purchasing debit cards that can only carry out Dollar transactions. This has made online gaming very frustrating, and now, many Nigerians are left out of exciting tournaments from around the world."

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MAINSTREAM AND NICHE GAMING IN NIGERIA

Sony and Nintendo have always had the greatest command of Nigerian customers, while Microsoft lagged behind. While popular in its own right, the Xbox usually appeals to financially successful gamers who can afford individual games rather than passing around game discs among friends and colleagues. The PlayStation, PlayStation 2, and PlayStation 3 proved exceptionally popular in the country. But as the Naira crashed terribly against the Dollar, the PlayStation 4 and PlayStation 5 failed to find a market among the masses. Today, the PlayStation 3 is still commonly found in many households, mainly because a hoard of games were still being released before the final game, Shakedown: Hawaii, was released in 2020. The accessibility of these games, even in 2023, has led to the contentment of many customers who choose to stick with the PlayStation 3 until further notice.

The success of Nintendo was global, and Nigeria was not left out. Closing out the 80s with the release of the Game Boy in Japan, North America, and Europe in 1990, the handheld dominated the African gaming market in the mid-to-late 90s, becoming one of the most significant consoles in Nigeria, handheld or otherwise. After an almost decade-long reign, the Gameboy Advance and Nintendo DS took over in the 2000s, aided by an increase in game shops in the country, which had begun to find a market.

While Nigeria is experiencing a gaming boom thanks to technological advances and social media, the 2000s were unrivaled in demand for consoles and games among Nigerians. Popular household ventures like Mario, Sonic, Grand Theft Auto, Pokémon, FIFA, and PES made their marks in the country, leading to a rise in immediate importation upon release in Japan, Europe, and America.

With free mobile games becoming more accessible, many Nigerians enjoy games for leisure purposes. Popular options like League of Legends, Candy Crush, Subway Surfers, and Angry Birds receive millions of hours of gameplay among Nigerians, while console entries like Call of Duty, Mortal Kombat, Tekken, and Street Fighter have remained popular for many years. Minority communities, particularly the anime and comic book fandoms, also enjoy niche games. From Dragon Ball Z releases to games like Injustice, fans of these worlds, which are not considered mainstream in Nigeria, can still enjoy their favorite characters outside of comics and television.

While the days of gaming centers are quickly vanishing, Dennis Kenny, an online gamer and manager of a center in Lagos, is still optimistic. As the Nigerian Naira continues to suffer an unstable fate, the prices of gaming consoles continue to skyrocket, and his business has seen a steady rise since the nationwide lockdown began to end in the latter half of 2020.

"The pandemic nearly destroyed my gaming business, but I think it destroyed the currency a lot more," Kenny says. "Let's face it – everybody wants to play the latest version of their favorite games. So while FIFA 2019 and Mortal Kombat X are still popular, you'll find that many will flock to my center for the chance to play Mortal Kombat 11 or FIFA 2023 on one of my PlayStation 5s. As consoles and games become more expensive, the investments I made before the pandemic are now starting to pay off. Most weekday evenings, my customers are mostly working-class men who retire to my center before heading home in the hopes of avoiding traffic and unwinding with one tournament or the other. It's a great way for many of them to bond, even if they've never met one another before."

According to the research and consulting firm Naavik, South Africa has the highest saturation of gamers at 40%, while Nigeria comes in third with 23%, closely behind Ghana at 27%. However, with an annual gaming revenue of $185 million, behind South Africa's $290 million, Nigeria boasts the second most lucrative gaming market in the entire continent. Unsurprisingly, as Nigeria falls into several gender stereotypes, men make up the majority of gamers, but with inclusive companies like the aforementioned GAMR Africa, co-founded by a woman, women are not left out entirely in the rise of the industry in the country.

Nigerians are a major player in Africa's journey to becoming a respected identity in the world's massive gaming stratosphere. But a lot more must be done for people to feel proud about their love for gaming, especially outside of leisure. With bodies like GAMR Africa working closely with Nigerians to boost the esports industry, the market for gamers will surely widen in the coming years. ■

OPINION

Experiences, Not Obligations

Don't make me set recurring calendar reminders for playing video games

BY KYLE HILLIARD

It is admittedly unfair of me, but any time a video game reveals itself as free-to-play, my interest immediately dissipates. Free-to-play games are not universally bad; plenty of brilliant design ideas, engaging stories, and fun mechanics can be found in games with no upfront admission fee. But once a game's goal shifts from singular experience to long-term engagement, any excitement I may have folds in on itself and disappears like Pac-Man.

It all stems from my desire for experiences, not obligations.

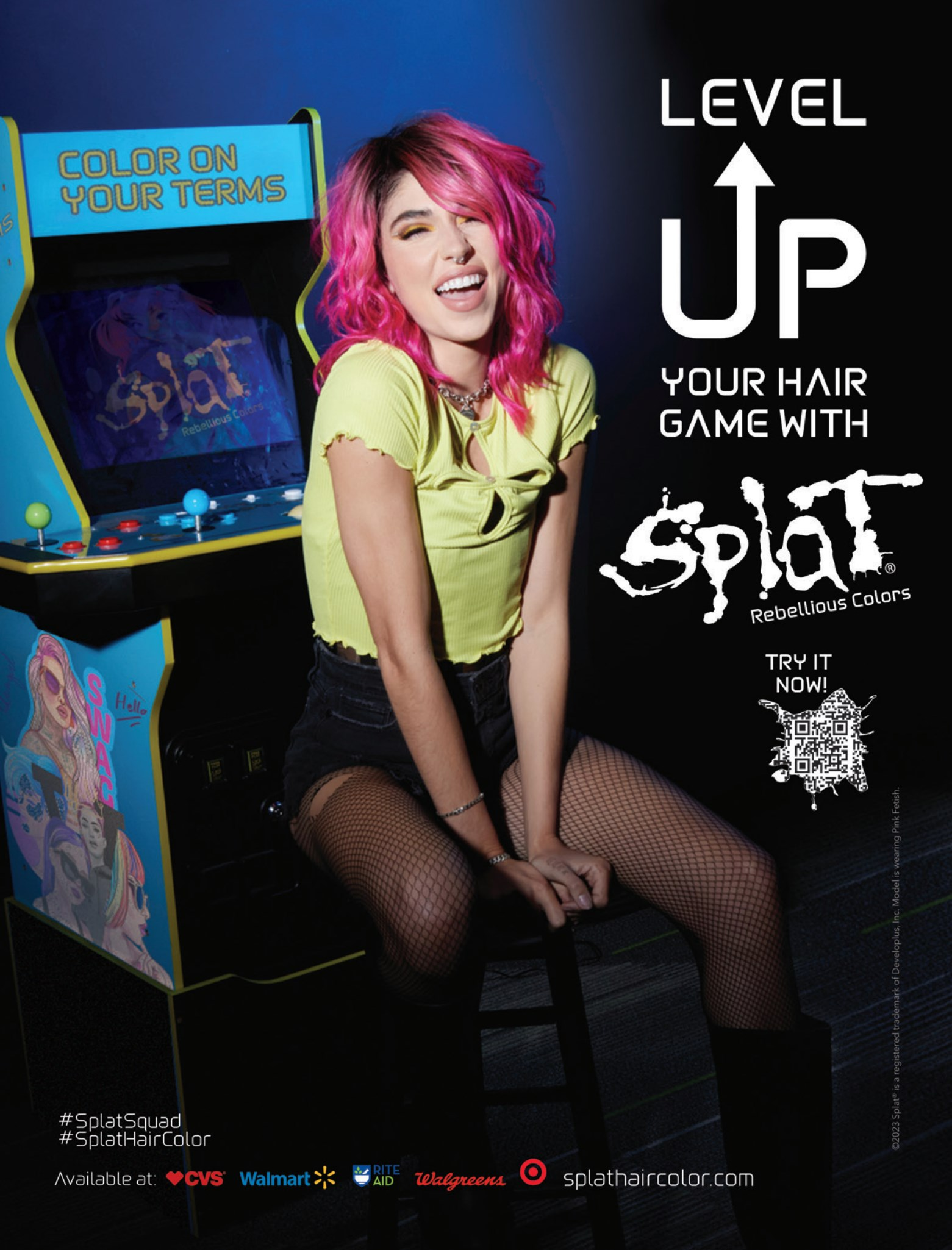
In free-to-play and comparable models, success is marked by player engagement. The more rounds a player queues into and the longer they play, the more likely they are to engage with the monetized elements. And the best way to encourage that engagement is to incentivize players to return. Daily check-in unlocks and numerical goals related to how often you use certain mechanics – those are obligations without a finish line. I've fallen into the trap a few times with mobile games and online shooters, but I no longer have the patience to engage.

Video games are a medium of artistic expression. My favorites have something insightful to say with their story, force you to reconsider basic mechanics in new ways, make me laugh, and have proper conclusions. I don't want to be distracted with goals outside the canon of the world I'm trying to lose myself in.

The illusion is shattered when I'm presented with paid skins or will receive seven additional bloop coins for signing in 10 days in a row. I am no longer fooling my brain into thinking it exists in an alternate reality where throwing bipedal plants at a monster means I can get on my spaceship to go home. Now I'm engaging with a piece of commerce. Like using a touchscreen to order fast food items, but instead of pressing my finger against a pane of unsanitary glass to receive a milkshake, I'm controlling an avatar with a pink scarf shooting at other players to get a new colored smoke trail for my parachute.

I don't fault developers for chasing this model; it can be extremely profitable when successful and ensure the long-term health of a business and its employees. I also understand the appeal of free-to-play games. It's an avenue toward a social community, and nothing encourages friends to check out a multiplayer game more than the promise that you won't have to pay a dime to at least try it out.

For me, however, I don't want required reading. I don't want to feel like I'm missing out on temporary events and licensed character skins just because I played a different video game. I don't want to commit to anything that demands I set a calendar reminder to play. It's the way television used to work, and there's a reason it's nearly extinct. In the time I have set aside for entertainment and video games, I want experiences from creators with specific ideas that conclude. I'm more than happy to pay for those – even at a high price point – exactly once. The only obligation I want is the recurring memory of how much I enjoyed that experience. ■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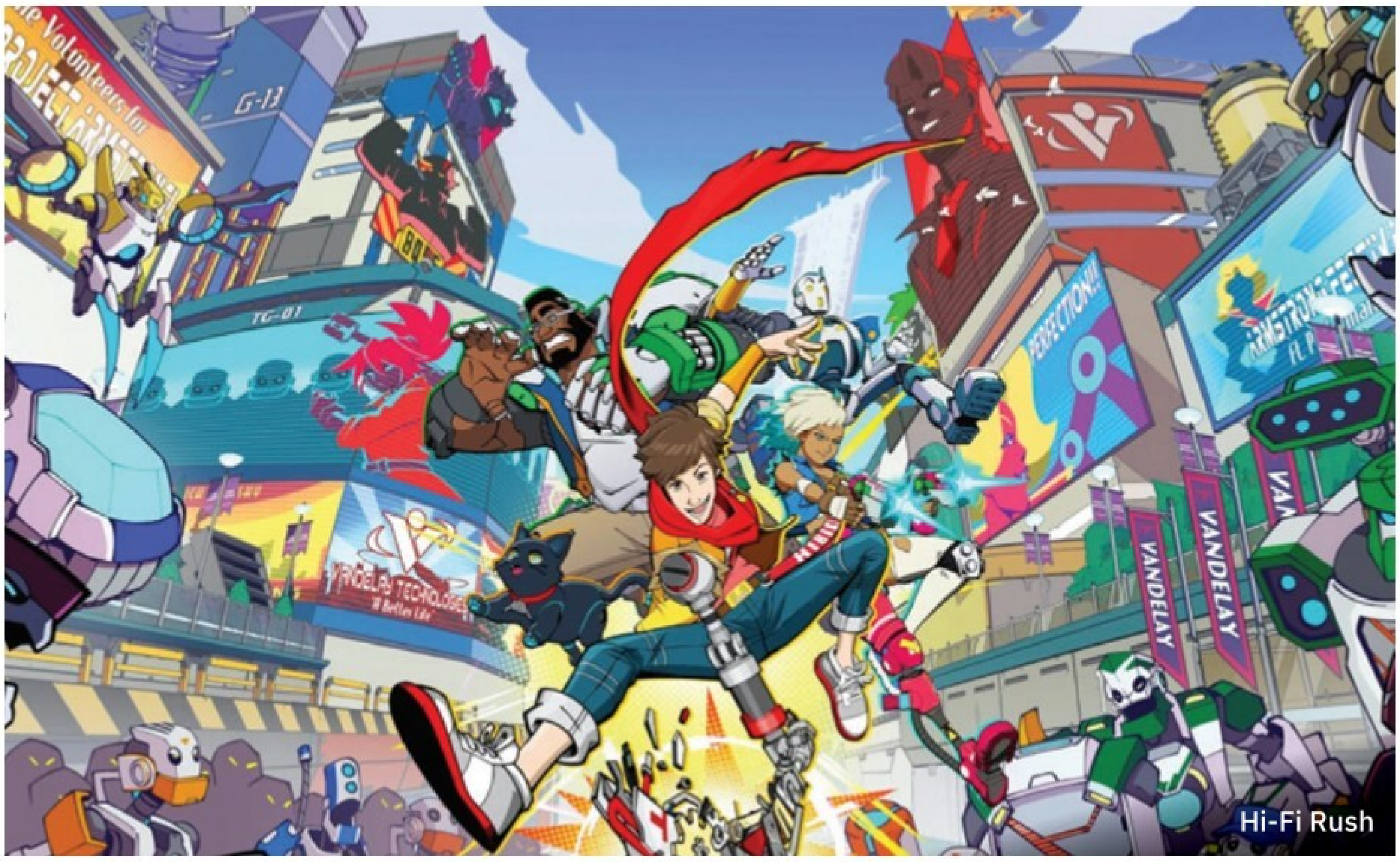
PROFILE

FULL CIRCLE

John Johanas' twisting journey to becoming the director of Hi-Fi Rush

BY **BLAKE HESTER**


Hi-Fi Rush

THE HARDEST PART OF BEING A DIRECTOR is getting out of the car in the morning, John Johanas says. Not literally. He takes the train to work every day. But it requires turning a switch in his brain. Naturally, he's an introvert. But when he goes to work, he has to be an extrovert. He has to lead teams, micromanage, make tough decisions, and accept making mistakes – all skills he says he learned without clear guidance.

To make that switch, Johanas says you need to be a "weird psychopath." Though he likes to think he *isn't* a weird psychopath. "Maybe to some people I am," he says. Nevertheless, no one can be at that level all the time. And yet, here he is.

So yeah, the hardest part of the day is getting out of the metaphorical car to go into his job at Tango Gameworks and lead video games, such as the well-received The Evil Within 2 and Hi-Fi Rush. He had no aspirations of becoming a game developer growing up. Much less a game director in Japan. Flying by the seat of his pants, he ended up here with no choice but to get out of the car every single day.

Johanas is quoting Stanley Kubrick, who was actually quoting Steven Spielberg during his 1997 acceptance speech for the D.W. Griffith Award when he said (via *Far Out Magazine*), "I believe Steven summed it up about as profoundly as you can. He thought the most difficult and challenging thing about directing a film was getting out of the car. I'm sure you all know the feeling."

That said, nearly a decade into his career as a game director, Johanas finally feels confident in his abilities. Not fully. But more than he did before.

Talk Show Host

In the late 2000s, the band Nine Inch Nails started giving away their albums for free, as they did with their 2008 record *The Slip*. More importantly, they were also giving away the stems (the individual parts that make up a recorded song) so fans could remix and republish their own versions.

Johanas, a fan, sitting in his dorm at Brandeis University, downloaded the files, dropped them into GarageBand, and then learned the hard way that he had no technical ability to do anything with the treasure trove of music he had. So, he deleted his work, moved the stems onto a USB – where they'd sit for more than a decade – and moved on.

Johanas was always interested in music growing up. He played the alto saxophone in his school's symphonic band. In high school, he wanted to play a cooler instrument, so he tried the guitar. That was too hard, so he picked up bass instead. After a couple of years, he took his lessons and re-applied them back to guitar. He then played guitar and sang in a Radiohead cover band.

He was also into video games – specifically Japanese ones. He got his first chance to see Japan when visiting a friend who had lived in America during their elementary school years.

Johanas immediately brings up his impressions of the Japanese public transit system (one of the best in the world). He recalls seeing an advertisement for a train that stopped him in his tracks – all because it had the Japanese alphabet, Hiragana, on it.

"The Hiragana for 'no' [の] I saw that," he says. "I didn't even know what it meant. I was like, 'What is that?!' They were like, 'It's the sound 'no.' And I was like, 'But what does it *mean*?' And they're like, 'It doesn't mean anything. It's a sound.' I was like, 'No, it must mean something.'"

He already liked Japanese video games, but now he was also captivated by the country's visual language and just the country in general. He wanted to learn more. When he started college, he studied Japanese. He also played drums in a Japanese cover band. One of the bands they covered was called Number Girl.

When he got the chance to study abroad, two options presented themselves: the London School of Economics or going to Kyoto for a semester. In Johanas' mind, going to London was a safer choice. On the other hand, he'd begun investing much of his life into learning Japanese. What if this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity?

He went to Japan.

John Johanas, the director of The Evil Within 2 and Hi-Fi Rush
↓

Bottomless Pit

Right after college, Johanas started teaching English as part of the JET Program – a government program built to teach foreign languages in Japan and a common way for people to get working visas to move to the country.

Johanas landed in Ibaraki, in the mountains north of Tokyo. It was a small town. The only thing open past 8:00 p.m. was a gym that closed at 10:00 p.m. He came to Japan with no game plan other than he'd figure his life out when he got here. He decided he'd spend two years working for JET and outside of work, buckle down on continuing to learn Japanese.

As his two years came to a close, Johanas realized he didn't like living in the middle of nowhere. He was from New York. Not Manhattan, but Long Island was at least close enough to the action.

In March 2010, Shinji Mikami, the creator of, among other things, the Resident Evil series, announced he was starting a new studio in Tokyo after about two decades at companies such as Capcom and Platinum Games. He called the studio TangoGameworks. Weirdly enough, Tango's recruitment page, according to Johanas, listed no actual game development credentials.

"It was just like, 'Likes games, wants to make games,'" he recalls. "I was like, 'Aight.'"

He applied to Tango – and went about it in every incorrect way imaginable.

"I did what you don't do in Japanese – I wrote a cover letter explaining why I applied," Johanas says. "I got called for an interview, a very casual interview. I also did something that you don't do in Japanese, which is I called afterward and said, 'Give me this job. I want this job.' I don't know if that was too aggressive or aggressive enough to push me over the edge."

It didn't matter. He got the job, becoming one of the earliest Tango employees. He was moving to Tokyo.

He was a Japanese game developer now.

Head Down

Johanas was hired as a level designer. Of course, he had no experience, and there wasn't anyone sitting him down and showing him the ropes. As he puts it, there was no "Tango Education Program." So, he got to work teaching himself parts of the job.

Early in Tango's history, Zenimax, the owner of Bethesda Softworks, acquired it. The studio made The Evil Within using id Tech 5, id Software's internal engine, then also used for the 2011 game Rage. Tango had access to Rage's in-game assets, allowing Johanas to experiment with level design. He made simple stuff. Like trying to make doors open or original Doom levels using Rage's assets.

On The Evil Within, Tango gave level designers free rein over their assignments. Johanas was in charge of a level set inside a mansion, which was basically his only direction. "It was like, 'Okay, you're going to go to this mansion level. This is the home of the villain Ruvik, and you're going to learn about him. That's it,'" he says. "'Figure it out.'" It was a story-driven level, but the story changed a lot during development, so the level also had to change a lot, too.

But an advantage to that lack of structure came after The Evil Within was released, when Johanas made his pitch for the game's DLC.

He was frustrated by the game's story. It didn't make sense. Or, as he puts it, "Messy is a nice way of saying it." He devised a pitch document with ideas for gameplay without weapons and thoughts on ways to fill in plotholes from the main game. You'd follow the character Juli Kidman through the events of The Evil Within, explaining the situations protagonist Sebastian Castellanos had found himself in. He didn't think he'd lead the project.

But it was time to give someone else a chance: with no previous experience, Johanas was in charge of the game's two DLCs, The Assignment and The Consequence. Like level design before it, he had to learn through experience.

"It was a fun-yet-traumatic period," he says. "Because you're obviously doing a lot of stuff that you don't know, and you're making lots of mistakes. People are supporting you. People are not supporting you because you're inexperienced. You have to fight for some things. You lose a lot of battles."

For the DLCs' stories, Johanas leaned on his only writing experience: a script writing class he took in college. That's when he learned he had to write what he knew. In The Assignment, Kidman's in a situation where she's given way too much responsibility and, as Johanas puts it, is chased by her boss, who has way too much clout.

"Well, it's funny because in The Consequence," he continues, "she basically usurps her boss. Literally, like, kills a mental image to become in charge of herself."

We Never Sleep

Johanas was the director of The Evil Within 2. He didn't have a choice. He was told that's what he was doing. It was daunting.

He knew how big and complicated full games could be to develop. Johanas had to learn how to lead a project and team at that scale.

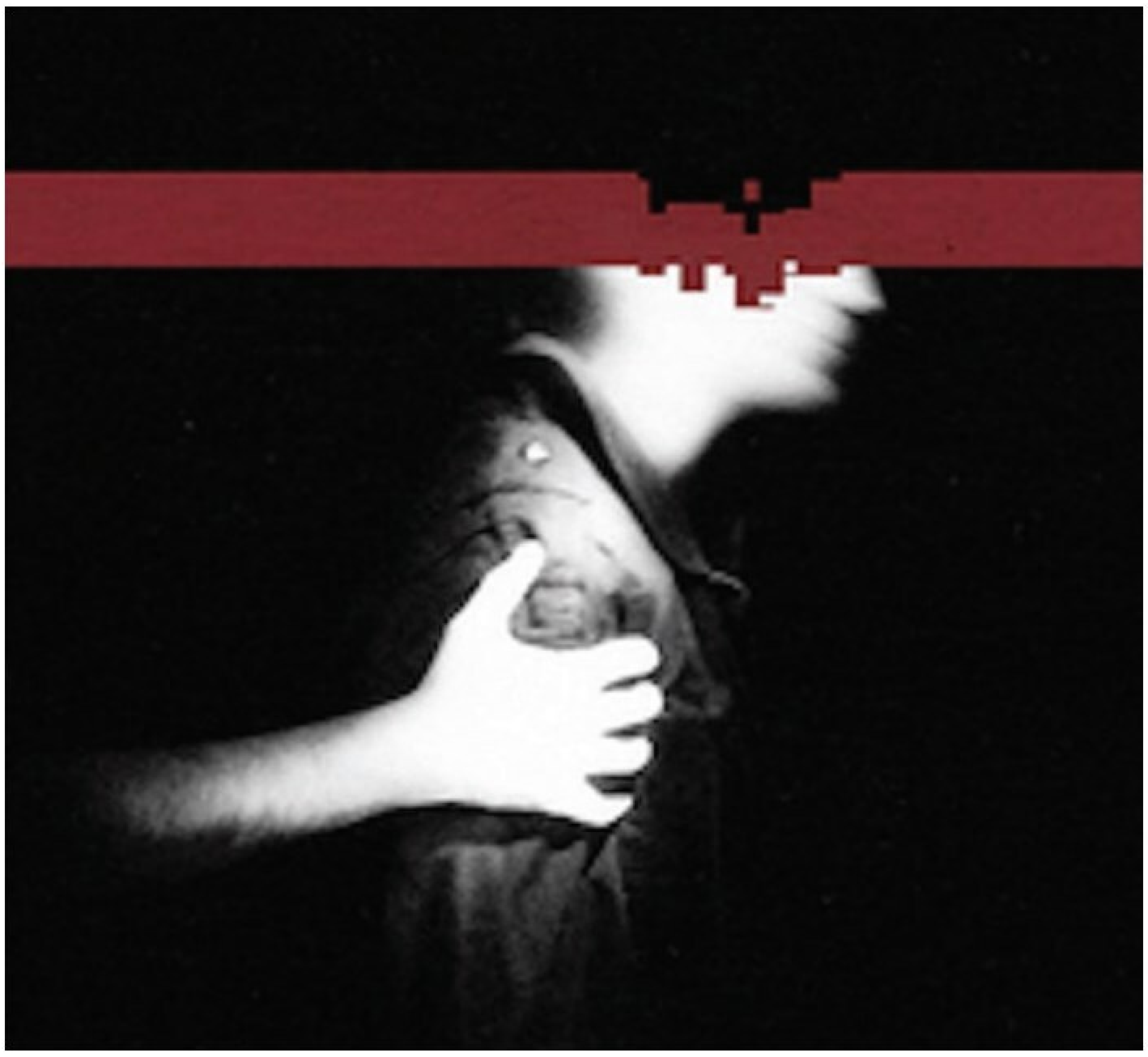
He says Mikami is good about seeing where things are going wrong and offering advice when possible. But even though Johanas was embarking on this massive undertaking, he was doing it with a lack of guidance or mentorship from Mikami.

"It was kind of non-mentorship in that sense," Johanas says. "It wasn't like, 'Let's meet every Friday. Let's talk about what you're thinking.' It wasn't like a therapy session. There would be weeks, months, or something like that where we'd not speak. And then he'd be like, 'Hey, what the f--k's happening?'"

Johanas has nothing negative to say about Mikami in any sense – the opposite, in fact – but still, the expectation that he might be more hands-on with his new directors was not the case, at least not for Johanas. Was that hands-off approach a good or bad thing? Johanas says he doesn't know.

"These aren't cheap things to make; you're using other people's money; you have to deliver a good product to people," Johanas says. "It would be irresponsible to not mentor some people. But I think that mentorship should probably depend on what you see that person's capable of doing if they need that. I'd like to think that either it didn't seem as necessary [for me] as other things, or maybe that was sort of the trial by fire."

Nine Inch Nails' *The Slip*
↓



Because The Evil Within 2 was a sequel, Johanas says the game's development timeline was much shorter than the first. That said, the team wanted to push for a bigger, better, and certainly prettier product. And maybe it pushed too much. Johanas admits it wasn't a positive experience. The massive amount of work took its toll.

"I'm not ashamed of the game by any means," he continues. "I'm actually very proud of it. But there are things you realize, 'We need to do better next time.' Or, 'I need to do better next time.' That directly informed how I went about pitching and making and producing the next game."

I've Seen Footage

Hi-Fi Rush was a departure for Tango, a far cry from its growing horror catalog. After The Evil Within 2, Johanas felt it was time to change things up.

"Me, sitting in the back row, coming off this project, and seeing people move on a theoretical conveyor belt to get further and deeper in there, I was like, 'If we're going to do it, we gotta do it now,'" he says.

The roots go back to when Johanas had an idea for an action game played to the rhythm of the game's soundtrack, like a movie trailer perfectly synced with music. He wanted to make a game that had that same musical impact.

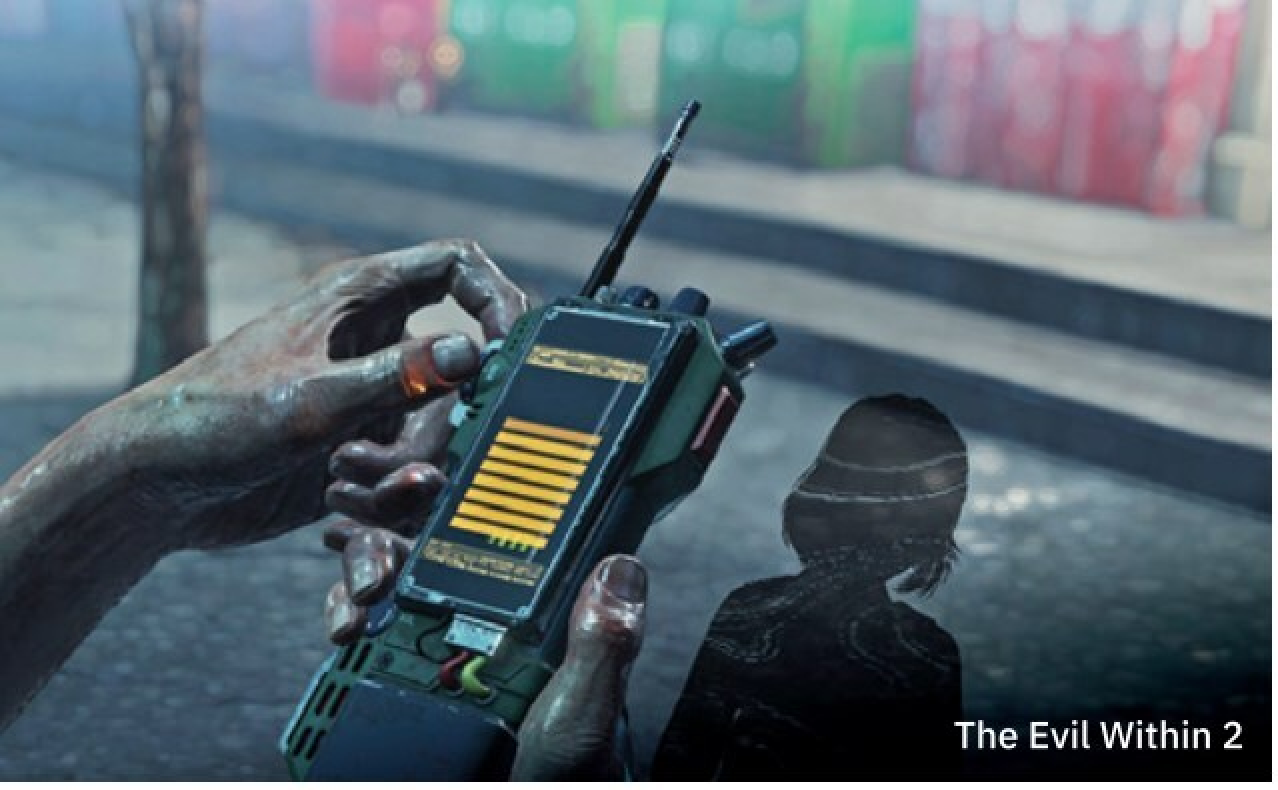
But it would be a tough sell for Tango. So Johanas and one other person, lead programmer Yuji Nakamura, took a year to build prototypes and prepare their pitch for Hi-Fi Rush.

The first prototype tested early gameplay ideas. The first proof of concept was made to test licensed music. Johanas had an idea about how to structure levels so that phases of a boss could transition with the different parts of the song. This was too early in the process for Tango to have licensed any music yet, but the team needed stems to test their ideas.

"And I was like, 'I got something,'" Johanas says.

Those Nine Inch Nails stems saved onto a USB more than a decade earlier finally came in handy; the song "1,000,000," which is in the game, became the proving ground that Johanas' licensed music idea could – and did – work.

Around the office, Hi-Fi Rush gained traction, and its team grew. The very concept was ridiculous:



The Evil Within 2

you play as the music-obsessed Chai with an mp3 player in his chest. Everything moved to the beat of music.

But even if Tango was onboard, Johanas knew he still had an uphill climb. First off, there were the studio's fans. He felt there would be pushback because this new game wasn't The Evil Within 3. There was also Tango's publisher, Bethesda, known mostly for gritty shooters like Fallout. He became obsessive.

"It was like, 'Everything that we show needs to be flawless,'" he continues. "Because there's a million reasons why they could theoretically cancel this project. It's weird. It's out there. It's not Bethesda."

A producer at Bethesda did the legwork getting the publisher onboard, sending a demo first to the company's younger employees. As Johanas recalls, the different tone struck a chord. They'd come back claiming they'd played the 10-minute demo 15 times.

"Then it became like a rumor," Johanas says. "I still remember at some meeting, I think it was still early, and Todd Howard was there. He was like, 'I heard about this thing that you're making. When can I get an invite to this thing?' I was like, 'I dunno.'"

He'd made the hard sell.

Everything in its Right Place

In Hi-Fi Rush, your central thrust is taking down the bosses of various departments within a corrupt megacorporation. There's the CEO, the head of marketing, and so on. The game's bosses are literal bosses.

Johanas works at a company. One owned by a billion-dollar corporation, no less, that during the development was bought by Microsoft, a trillion-dollar corporation. He again leaned on writing what he knew.

"Once you're in a big business, and not to throw shade at anyone in Bethesda or Microsoft, you realize that these are human people who don't get along a lot of times and who argue," Johanas says. "It's kind of a cluster-f--k that things miraculously happen."

Luckily, the corporations above him were behind his weirdo idea. And they could help with music licensing – unknown territory for Tango and, as Johanas calls it, "the biggest pain in the ass."

On top of the game's original soundtrack, Tango licensed music from Nine Inch Nails, The Prodigy, The Joy Formidable, and others. It even got a Number Girl song in there.

Hi-Fi Rush was surprise-launched on January 25, 2023 on Xbox and PC during a Bethesda livestream. Any apprehensions the team might've had about the release model dissipated when reactions started rolling in.

It was, more or less, a hit and built a large dedicated fandom compared to other Tango games, further boosting the company's profile. Johanas has also spent the months since release doing dozens of interviews promoting the game. He spends a lot of time replying to fans on Twitter, thanking them for playing.

But the biggest takeaway was gaining the further support of his team.

"[They're interested in] taking the jump with you," he says. "Through the whole project, I was totally understandable of everyone freaking out about, 'Is this going to work? I don't get it.' But I was like, 'Please, just trust me on this one.' Especially when it was coming together at the end, all the pieces coming into place, we were hitting those benchmarks. The team were like, 'This is really good.'"

Whirring

In his D.W. Griffith Award speech, Kubrick went on to talk about the joys of film-making.

He said: "Anyone who has ever been privileged to direct a film also knows that although it can be like trying to write *War and Peace* in a bumper car in an amusement park, when you finally get it right, there are not many joys in life that can equal the feeling."

Johanas is finally starting to feel confident as a director. Not entirely; he says no one's ever fully confident. But he's getting better.

He never planned to be a game developer. Hell, he says he didn't even see himself being in Japan at one point – much less having spent more than a third of his time on Earth there, fluent in the language, and having built a life for himself. Maybe one day he'll leave. Maybe he won't. He says he just goes with whatever feels right.

For now, being a director still feels right. And maybe no other joys can equal that feeling for him.

When we wrap up the interview, although it's long into the afternoon, Johanas says he's going to the office to work.

It's still a new day, after all. He has to get out of the car. ■

For more on John Johanas' life and career, you can read a much longer version of this story on GameInformer.com

A TWISTED REINVENTION

How Peacock's *Twisted Metal* renewed my love of the franchise

BY MARCUS STEWART

"THIS IS GONNA BE FUN!" exclaims Sweet Tooth as he lobs his machete towards Anthony Mackie's John Doe, who narrowly dodges the weapon as it careens into a casino slot machine.

I'm not sure I agree with the iconic murder clown. I'm watching the first teaser for Peacock's *Twisted Metal*, and while I wasn't sure what to expect from an adaptation of one of my favorite childhood franchises, whatever hopes I had fell away watching this strange out-of-context clip. Sweet Tooth dancing to and singing the lyrics to Sisqó's "Thong Song?" Showing a comedic fistfight instead of vehicles blowing each other up? I know the showrunners are aiming for laughs, but what have they done to my game?

After watching the show's first season, I must confess: I really like *Twisted Metal*.

Before Joel and Ellie, Kratos, Nathan Drake, and even Crash Bandicoot were the faces of PlayStation, there was Twisted Metal. The franchise popularized the now-dormant car combat genre thanks to its wildly fun gameplay, dark humor, and a demented cast of characters – notably its mascot, Sweet Tooth. The chaotic action carried players through numerous entries, from its highest highs (Twisted Metal 2, Twisted Metal: Black) to its lowest lows (Twisted Metal 3 and 4).

Despite its success, the series has been hibernating since its enjoyable but forgettable 2012 reboot. Hope for a revival unexpectedly arose when Peacock announced a 10-episode live-action adaptation. Helmed by *Cobra Kai* scribe Michael Jonathan Smith alongside *Deadpool* writers Rhett Smith and Paul Wernick, *Twisted Metal* stars John Doe, an amnesiac delivery driver (dubbed a Milkman) in a post-apocalyptic United States. At the dawn of the 21st century, a calamity caused society to collapse. Now, 20 years later, remnants of humanity have huddled in walled cities across the now Divided States of America. Those living outside these shelters fight daily for survival on the lawless open roads, which numerous gang factions and deranged personalities dominate.

Series fans may tilt their heads at this setup, which sounds closer to *Mad Max* than Twisted Metal. The games have always centered around a singular concept: drivers compete in a death tournament organized by Calypso, a mysterious man with the power to grant any wish to the victor (usually with an unfortunate, monkey paw-style twist). Though different, this approach successfully introduces new layers to the mythos I didn't know I wanted.

Firstly, it made me care about the people behind the wheel, something I never had outside of Sweet Tooth. John Doe,

a man tasked with delivering a special package to earn permanent residence in New San Francisco, is a goofy idiot with a good heart. Pairing him with Quiet (Stephanie Beatriz), a mysterious loner on a revenge quest, leads to some fun expletive-laden bickering, not unlike the banter dominating the *Guardians of the Galaxy* films. In fact, the series' tone is highly reminiscent of James Gunn's work, particularly HBO's *Peacemaker*. That's a compliment. *Twisted Metal*'s often idiotic, violent humor doesn't always land, but it's fully aware of how stupid it is and embraces silliness in ways I usually find more entertaining than cringy. Highlights include Stu, a clumsy, well-meaning everyman played by Mike Mitchell, but the series' best character is its most recognizable: Sweet Tooth.

Voiced by Will Arnett and physically performed by Joe Seanoa, AKA Samoa Joe, the pair capture the clown's intimidating presence and unhinged, sometimes humorous, personality. The show manages a great balance of making Sweet Tooth scary when he needs to be and a fun-loving outcast you almost want to hang out with … almost. Agent Stone, the show's main villain portrayed by Thomas Hayden Church, offers the perfect foil as a cold, law-obsessed sheriff running a brutal police force hellbent on restoring order.

Some adaptations almost feel ashamed of their source material, but *Twisted Metal* embraces its roots through copious references. Some are as blatantly ridiculous as John entering a Twisted Metal 2 cheat code to activate his car's defenses. Others are subtle, with some cameos going over my head until I looked up their name in a Wiki. The best are self-aware; expect to see a few faces from the generally reviled Twisted Metal 4 treated like utter losers and bullet fodder. In a few cases, the show redeems less beloved drivers – I never thought I'd be rooting for Flower Power.

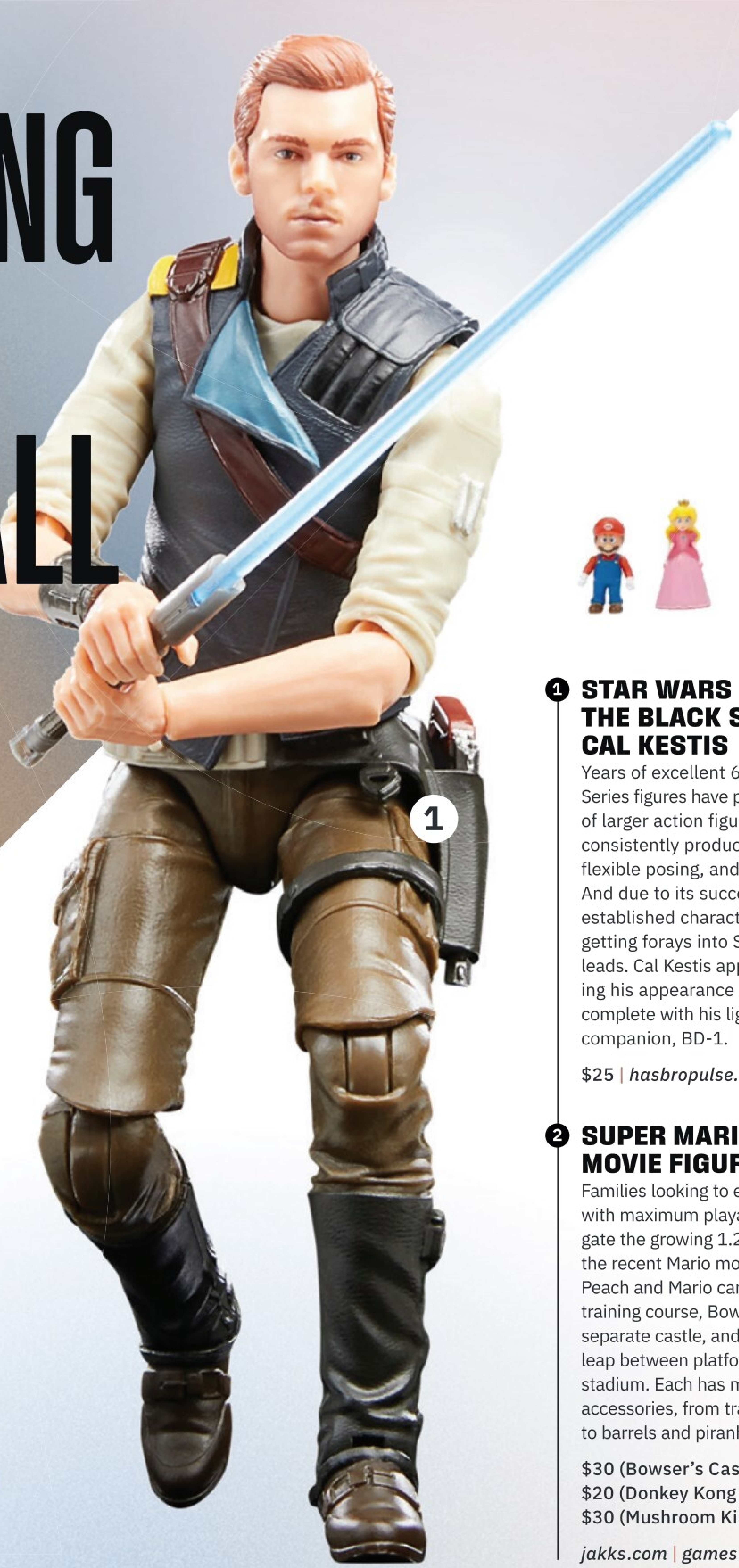
The story juggles multiple threads without getting overburdened and does a solid job fleshing out John, Quiet, Stone, and Sweet Tooth with flashbacks detailing their respective backstories. The performances are generally good, and the story features quite a bit of heart with some surprisingly touching moments. Though I sometimes felt emotional whiplash jumping from hyper goofy spectacle to deadly serious plot twist, the show manages a respectable tonal balance.

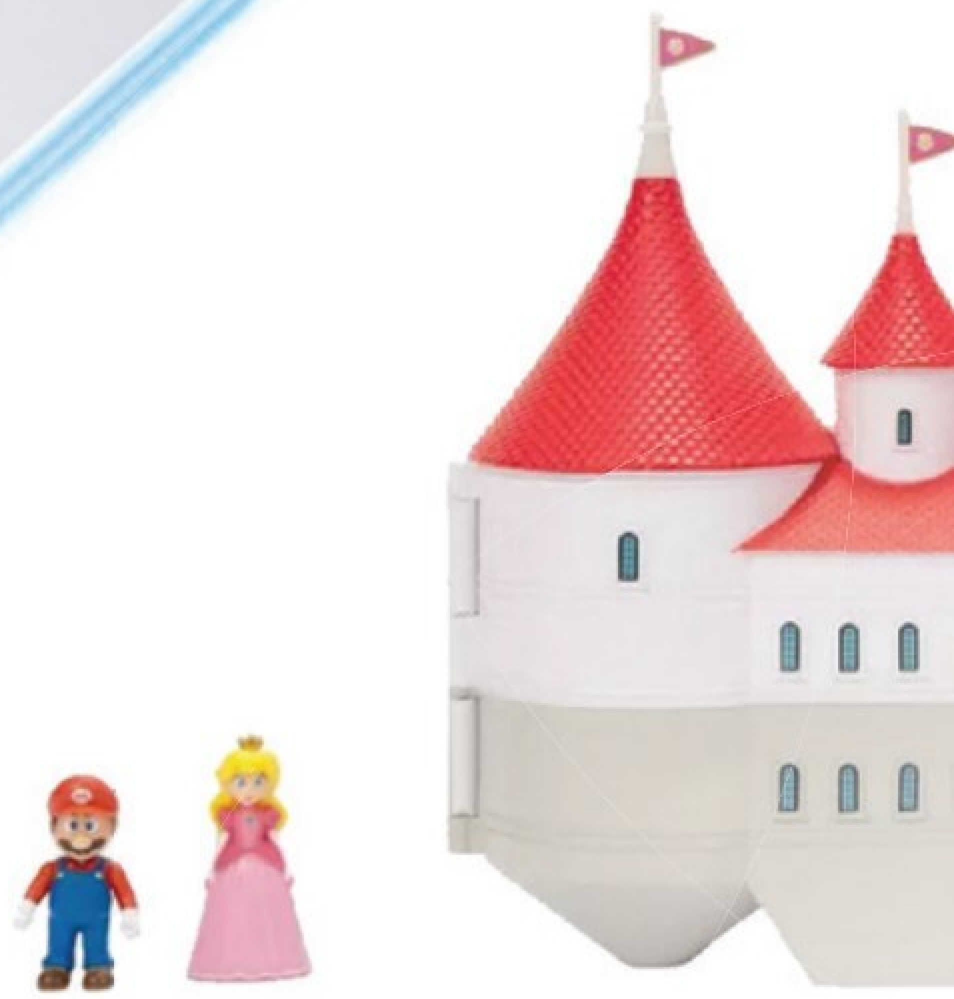
Twisted Metal doesn't feature nearly as much car combat as I expected; most vehicular skirmishes wrap up in a few minutes, and much of the prolonged action is on foot. Without spoiling, the plot eventually rewards fans with what they're looking for, with a satisfying finale that leaves enough doors open to lure viewers back for a potential second season. The best compliment I can give is that I hope a second season happens. While I was uneasy, I had a blast once I settled into the show's groove and the plot hit the gas. Like the games, *Twisted Metal* is undeniably stupid and gratuitously violent, but it swings for the fences and hits home runs more often than not. ■

GEAR

GAMING TOYS FOR ALL

BY MATT MILLER





❶ STAR WARS THE BLACK SERIES CAL KESTIS

Years of excellent 6-inch scale Black Series figures have proven the advantages of larger action figures. The toy line consistently produces good detail, flexible posing, and fun accessories. And due to its success with other established characters, we're now getting forays into Star Wars' gaming leads. Cal Kestis appears here celebrating his appearance in Jedi Survivor, complete with his lightsaber and stalwart companion, BD-1.

$25 | ***hasbropulse.com*** | ***gamestop.com***

❷ SUPER MARIO BROS. MOVIE FIGURE PLAYSETS

Families looking to enjoy miniature fun with maximum playability should investigate the growing 1.25-inch playsets from the recent Mario movie. Tiny figures of Peach and Mario can navigate the castle training course, Bowser lords over his separate castle, and Donkey Kong can leap between platforms in his battle stadium. Each has moving parts and accessories, from trap doors and jail cells to barrels and piranha plants.

$30 (Bowser's Castle),
$20 (Donkey Kong Stadium),
$30 (Mushroom Kingdom Castle)

jakks.com | ***gamestop.com***

❸ POP! OVERWATCH 2 JUMBO ECHO

After Cole Cassidy freed her from military quarantine, Echo joined the Overwatch squad. She can also join your shelf in this super-sized take on the artificially intelligent hero. The vinyl figure will tower over much of your Pop! collection at over 10 inches in height and takes on even more prominence as you turn the lights off, as this figure glows in the dark.

$45 | *funko.com*

❹ LEGO SONIC'S GREEN HILL ZONE LOOP CHALLENGE

An earlier Lego Sonic set featured Sonic's familiar Green Hill Zone, but if you'd like a bit more play with your building, the newer Loop Challenge set is the way to go. Sonic, Amy, and Dr. Eggman mini-figures join other colorful creatures for plenty of storytelling opportunities. But the included "speed sphere" is the real fun, letting you launch the blue blur through the loop and giant ring. The 802-piece build measures over 14 inches wide and lets any fan live out their super-star fantasies. ■

$100 | *lego.com*

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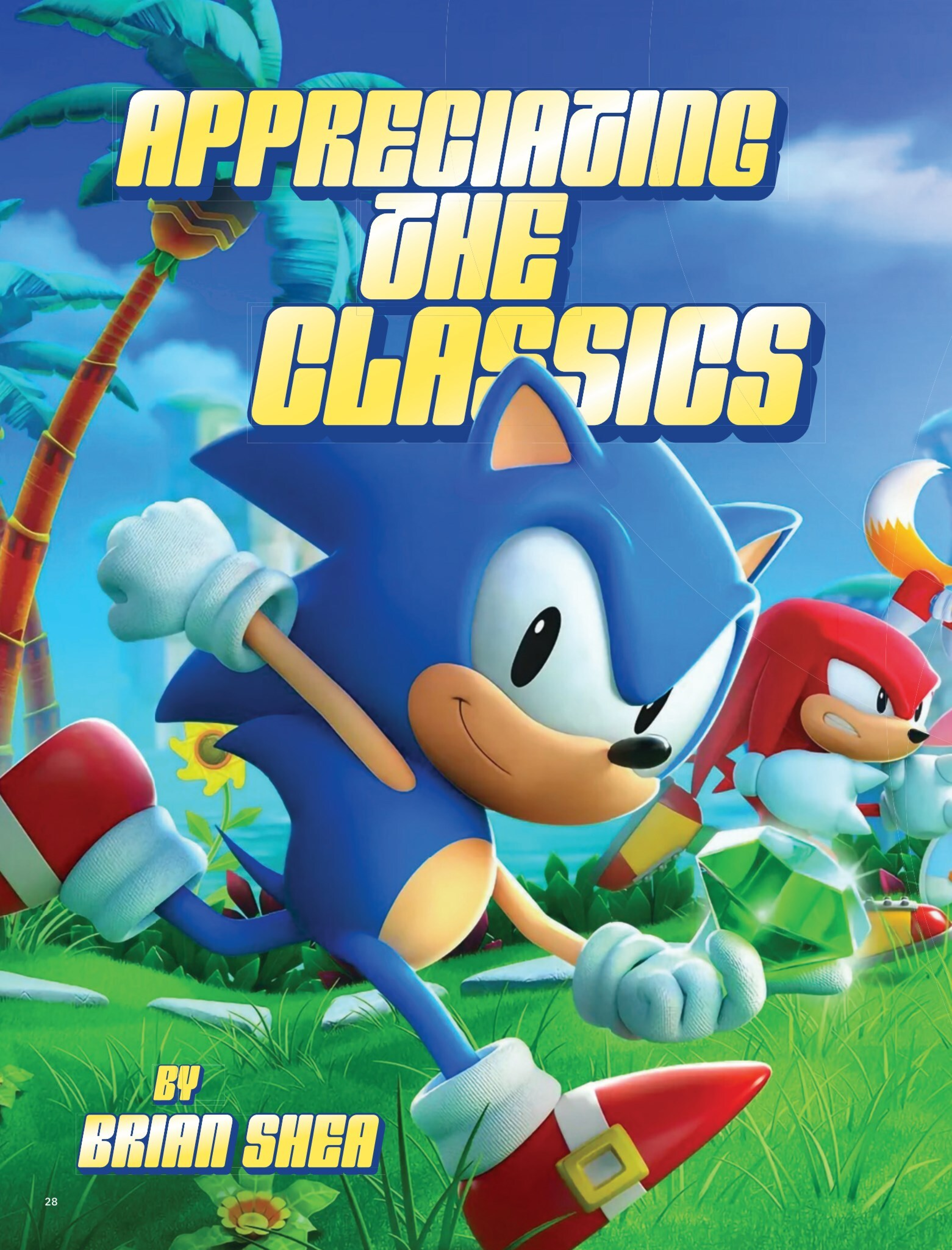


APPRECIATING THE CLASSICS

BY BRIAN SHEA

*We sped through never-before-seen zones to learn more about **Sonic Superstars** and the franchise's return to its 2D roots*

This time last year, Sonic the Hedgehog as a brand was thriving. Thanks to successful live-action films, a popular comic series, and a litany of brand deals, Sega's blue mascot was once again a juggernaut in mainstream consciousness. All that was missing was a hit in the medium that put Sonic on the map in the first place, and one of gaming's greatest comeback stories would be complete.

In 2017, we received Sonic Mania, a retro-facing 2D side-scrolling game that delivered unique takes on classic stages while implementing novel gimmicks and a few all-new zones. The release was a hit, serving as one of the best-reviewed Sonic the Hedgehog video games of all time, and one that many point to as the best 2D platformer the franchise has ever seen. Though Sonic Mania was created by a team of external developers, the Sonic franchise nonetheless had its first bona fide hit in years.

Sonic is known for carrying forward momentum, but when the success of Sonic Mania juxtaposed against the Sonic Team-developed Sonic Forces, which came out mere months later, it painted a discouraging picture. Contrasted with Sonic Mania, which received near-universal acclaim with a review average of 86 on aggregate website Metacritic, Sonic Forces fell flat, receiving a score of 57. And just like that, the franchise's forward movement came to a screeching halt.

Coming back to summer 2022, Sonic Team was once again gearing up to launch a triple-A, modern Sonic game, but fans were hesitant after getting their hopes up with Sonic Forces and other recent entries that fell short of expectations. Sonic Frontiers didn't make a great first impression, with early footage doing little to impress, and the fan base was quick to criticize and write it off as another disappointment from Sonic Team. But then the tide started to turn.

Slowly, the footage began looking better, and media impressions (including our own as part of our cover story in Issue 347) became more and more positive in the lead-up to launch. While the final product, which arrived last November, didn't ascend to the heights of Sonic Mania, it did earn a respectable 71 on Metacritic and became the best-selling 3D Sonic game ever. Sonic Team finally had its long-awaited hit, and for the first time in years, fans had a shared sense of optimism for the future.

However, while Classic Sonic appeared in Sonic Generations, Sonic Forces, and spin-off entries, outside of Mania, the Classic branch of the franchise has received a tiny fraction of the attention its Modern counterpart has received since its introduction. Even an early-2010s attempt at a 2D revival in Sonic the Hedgehog 4 featured Modern Sonic's character design and move set.

However, Sega is poised to change that lack of emphasis on the Classic side. This past June, the company announced Sonic Superstars, a game that draws from the most beloved 2D entries from the series' early years, but delivers something completely new. Though we came away impressed with our short time playing the game's first two zones at Summer Game Fest 2023 in Los Angeles, California, we drove down the highway to Sonic Team's headquarters in Burbank to play through nearly half the game and speak with key members of the development team to learn why Sonic Superstars could be Classic Sonic's next big hit.

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1 to 4-Player Platforming
PUBLISHER Sega **DEVELOPER** Arzest, Sonic Team **RELEASE** Fall

GETTING THE GANG BACK TOGETHER

The road to Sonic Superstars began during the COVID-19 lockdown. Sonic Team creative officer Takashi Iizuka received a message from Naoto Ohshima, co-creator of Sonic the Hedgehog and current president of Japanese development company Arzest. Ohshima, who had worked for Sega from 1987 to 1999 and created the original character designs for both Sonic and Dr. Eggman, wanted to have a call with Iizuka. But this wasn't a business pitch or some kind of meeting request. Instead, it was an invitation to do what many of us did during the locked down months.

"Ohshima-san said, 'Hey, Iizuka-san, we should get on Zoom and have a drinking party together,'" Iizuka recalls. "We did and we started drinking and chatting, and had the conversation of, 'Hey, we want to bring back a Classic Sonic game,' and in that drinking party, Ohshima-san said, 'I really, really want to get involved. Let's get together and make this happen,' and that's how it all kicked off."

Ohshima had been keeping up with the Sonic franchise, even though his last involvement with the series was prior to the turn of the century with Sonic Adventure on Dreamcast. He has a strong appreciation for games like Sonic Colors, Sonic Mania, and Sonic Frontiers. However, his favorite is Sonic Generations, thanks to the beautiful visuals and the intersection of Modern and Classic Sonic – an intersection that perhaps made the pitch of Sonic Superstars, a Classic Sonic game with modernized visuals and mechanics, more appealing to him.

Though Ohshima has worked on many games in the 24 years since leaving Sega to found his own studio, unsurprisingly, his reputation as the man who designed one of the most iconic characters on the planet has followed him nearly two and a half decades later.

"A lot of people who follow me on social networks support Sonic," Ohshima says. "I've been thinking for a while that I wanted to show how much I appreciate them, so I really wanted to take part in developing the game."

Iizuka knew that Ohshima was the right choice to collaborate with on Sonic Superstars thanks to his long history of working on the Classic Sonic games. In addition to his work on character design for games like Sonic the Hedgehog and Knuckles Chaotix, Ohshima also directed Sonic CD, one of the most beloved entries in the series. Meanwhile, Iizuka has been at Sega since 1992, working on nearly every Sonic title since 1994's Sonic the Hedgehog 3. In addition to heading up Sonic Team's development efforts for much of his time there, many view him as the man responsible for ushering the Sonic franchise into the Modern era as the director of the Sonic Adventure games.

"Ohshima-san's knowledge is kind of, I wouldn't say 'stuck,' but it's kind of preserved in that Classic Sonic mindset, so his way of thinking about things, the way of designing things, the way of having things look... all that design and creative ability is in the Classic mindset," Iizuka says. "But all of his technology and the way he's building things are now in the current process, so he can make these current games using modern technology, but still apply all of the classic design and sensibilities to it."

Though Arzest and Ohshima led development efforts on Sonic Superstars, Sonic Team collaborated frequently, with Iizuka and Ohshima constantly sharing ideas and production duties. Once the direction of the title was determined, much of the development fell to Arzest, but Sonic Team was far from hands-off. Members of Sonic Team, including Iizuka, even traveled from Burbank, California to Yokohama, Japan to work together on developing Sonic Superstars.

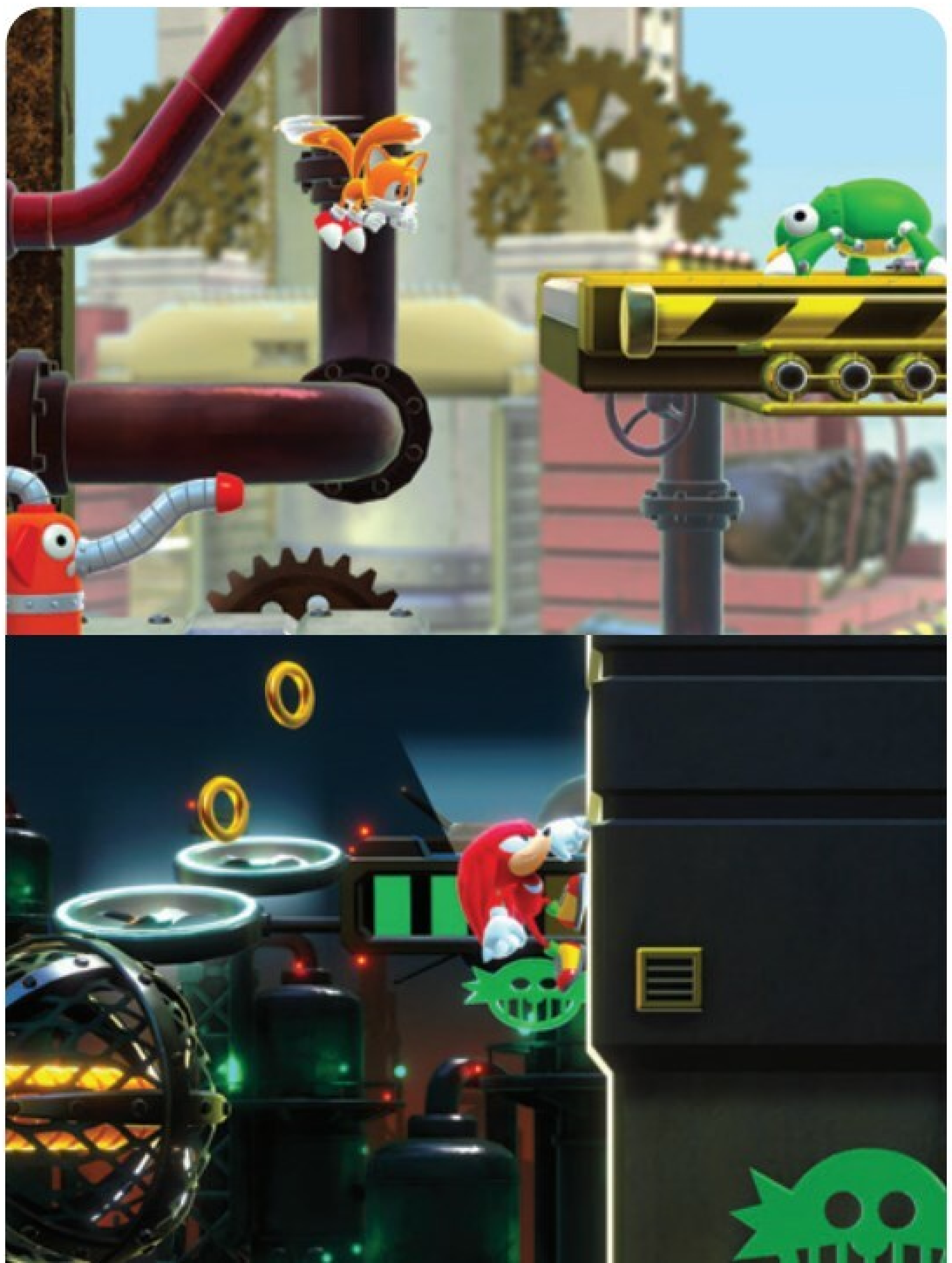
With both Ohshima and Iizuka filling the role of producer, they could divvy up the duties in a more effective manner than when they had worked together in the '90s. "When I was part of Sonic Team, I was a game director while also working on player specifications and model animations," Ohshima says. "I also did a range of producer-like work, like character product rollouts and negotiations with the marketing department. Iizuka-san took care of that part this time, so I could focus on game development."

From the sounds of it, things have gone well. Though Ohshima hints in a couple of instances that the development cycle was shorter than expected, Sonic Team – and in particular, Iizuka – has impressed him. "I claim to be an idea person, but Iizuka-san is an idea person who always wows me,"

he says. "Sonic Team was just as impressive as expected. People I knew long ago have become super capable, and it was great working with them."

Likewise, Iizuka enjoyed the reunion as well. "He's a great creative mind and he's really just fun to talk to," he says. "And he always has lots of ideas to improve the game and it brings a lot of inspiration. He's very different to work with than a lot of other developers."

With both Iizuka and Ohshima seemingly satisfied with the collaborative arrangement, the two were able to focus wholly on their primary objective of creating a game not only for fans of the most beloved 2D Sonic games, but also a game for an entirely new generation of players.



WHY NOT SONIC MANIA 2?

After 2017's Sonic Mania proved to be a massive success for the franchise, many assumed a sequel developed in conjunction with Christian Whitehead, PagodaWest Games, and Headcannon was all but inevitable. Unfortunately, it never happened. Headcannon continued working with the Sonic brand through 2022's Sonic Origins and its 2023 update Sonic Origins Plus, while Whitehead founded his own studio, Evening Star, alongside fellow Sonic Mania developers in 2018. This past June, Evening Star announced its first game, titled Penny's Big Breakaway, coming in early 2024 (read more on p. 61).

In 2021, reports from a gaming insider named Zippo surfaced that internal plans to create a true successor to Sonic Mania had been scrapped due to differences between Sonic Mania's external developers and Sega. While not directly confirming that particular report, Sonic Team creative officer Takashi Iizuka confirms that he had talks with Whitehead following the release of Mania.

"There was a period after the development of Sonic Mania when we worked with them to consider concepts for the next generation of Classic Sonic," Iizuka says. "It's too bad that it didn't become a finished game. Still, I'm pleased that the next generation of Classic Sonic that we talked about with them has been achieved with Superstars."

Even beyond some concepts seemingly making the jump from the early Sonic Mania sequel to Sonic Superstars, Sonic Mania's success was instrumental in the creation of Sonic Superstars. "During Sonic Mania's development, I didn't expect this level of fan reaction or success," Iizuka says. "That success created the opportunity to think about the next generation of Classic Sonic and led to Sonic Superstars. Sonic Mania helped us realize that fans still wanted and enjoyed the Classic series."

On Twitter, Whitehead seemed to approve of the work being done on Sonic Superstars, with one retweet about the game's physics simply containing the thumbs-up emoji, with another stating, "Will have more to say on this when it's appropriate, but the Mania physics were indeed fully translated to modern 3D."

Despite Whitehead's confirmation that this work was done, Iizuka says the engine is completely unique to Sonic Superstars. "The programming was all done from scratch by Arzest," he says.

We reached out to Evening Star for comment on this topic, but did not receive a response.

THRILL OF THE FEEL

Sonic Superstars aims to give players an experience loyal to those initial Classic Sonic entries on the Genesis while incorporating myriad advancements gaming has experienced in the decades since. The modernized 3D visuals may bring back memories of the much-maligned Sonic the Hedgehog 4, but if you were among the many who were disenchanted by that poorly received attempt at bringing the series back to its 2D roots, you can rest easy.

According to Iizuka, Sonic the Hedgehog 4, which was developed primarily by Sonic Advance studio, Dimps, was more focused on giving players a 2D Modern Sonic game, complete with gameplay tenets from that branch of the franchise. In contrast, Sonic Superstars is more about replicating the traditional Classic Sonic experience utilizing the modern technology of today.

Sonic 4's physics was perhaps the chief complaint players had, which is perhaps why so many fans of the franchise were taken aback when a new 2D game featuring 3D visuals was announced. But Iizuka says getting the feel of speeding through the zones correct was a top priority.

"[With Sonic 4,] we wanted to bring in the Modern character and create even the physics that were more representative of a Modern Sonic game, something like the Sonic Advance series," he says. "[With Superstars,] we didn't want to do a Modern Sonic 2D game; we wanted to go back and really capture that Classic Sonic feel – that touch and feel of the Classic Sonic series – that was really the core idea behind creating this game. The first thing we did was go in and really make sure the Classic physics were there, the Classic animation looked correct, and all the Classic roots were there to create the game."

Instead of looking at recent games for inspiration, Iizuka has been thinking a lot about the original run of Sonic 1, Sonic 2, and Sonic 3 & Knuckles. The affection he has for those games led to Sonic Mania, as well as 2022's Sonic Origins compilation, but he wanted to create something more modern while still sticking with what players loved so much about those pixel-art titles.

"Sonic Mania and Sonic Origins were both 2D games, but they were created with pixels, using that retro style to give it a retro feel," Iizuka says. "When you make a 2D game using pixel art, you kind of end up targeting a very specific core audience. We wanted to bring this game to as many people as possible, and in order to really make it look and feel as appealing to a wider audience, we needed to use the 3D assets to give it that current look. But we do know that core fans want that old Classic Sonic look, they want that old Classic Sonic feel, so we focused on making sure the controls were solid and the look was really representative of a Classic Sonic game."

During my extended hands-on with Sonic Superstars, I marveled not only at the beautiful and smooth animations, but at the retro physics as well. This is a far cry from Sonic 4 or even the 2D physics from Modern Sonic games like Generations and Forces; Sonic Superstars feels true to the best 2D entries from the Blue Blur's past from the very first act I played, and after spending hours speeding through around half of the game, I'm even more confident in how well the game fares in action.

IN THE ZONES

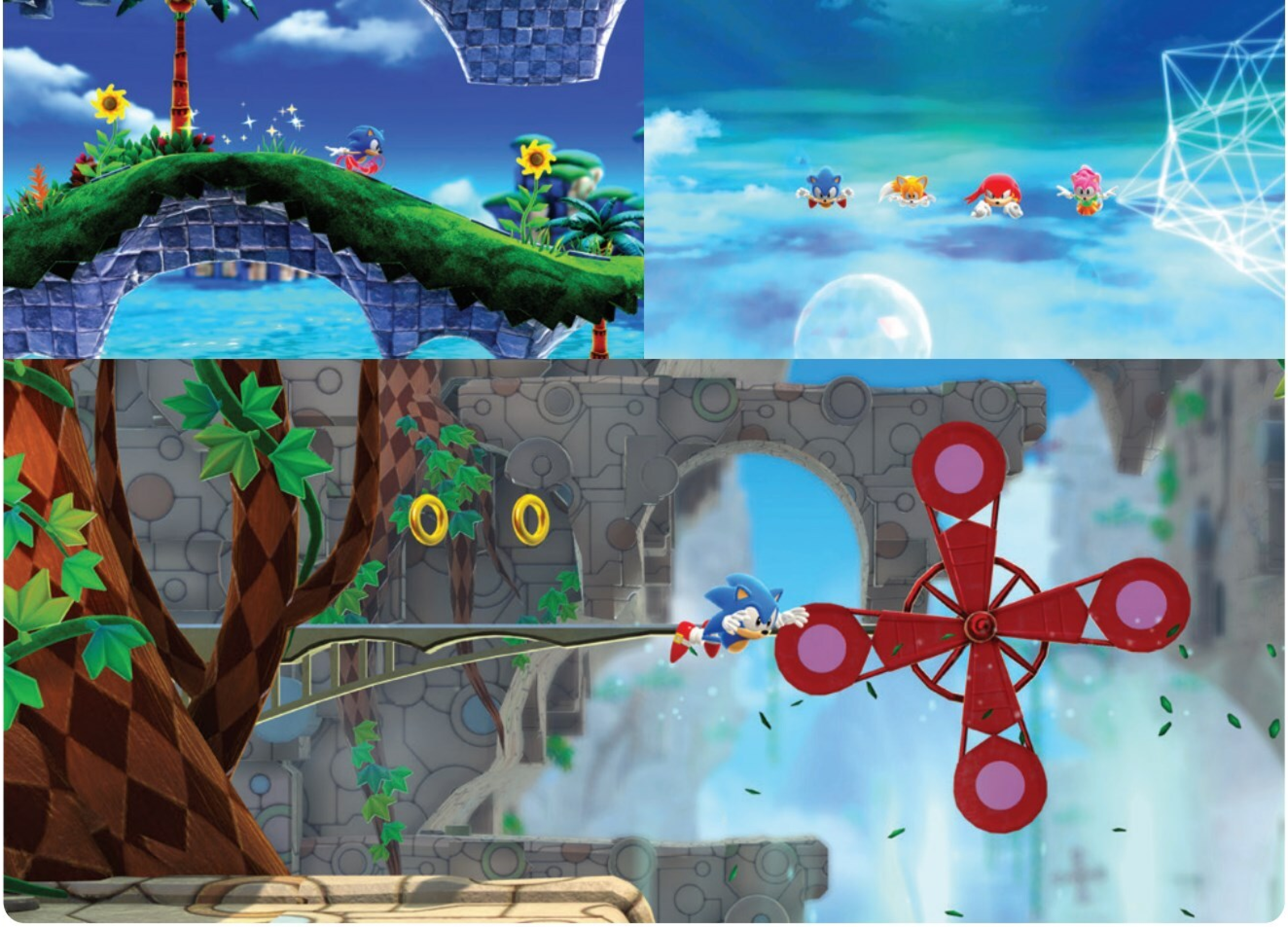
My hands-on time with Sonic Superstars begins like everyone else who had the opportunity to play the game: choosing my character. Just like the development team behind the game feels like a reunion of the early days, so too does the character roster. Players can choose from Sonic, Tails, Knuckles, and Amy, each with their own abilities. Sonic can use the drop-dash that debuted in Sonic Mania and carried forward into Sonic Origins, while Tails can fly and swim, Knuckles can climb and glide, and Amy can use her hammer to attack enemies and double jump.

STICKING TOGETHER

For the first time in series history, Sonic Superstars offers true four-player cooperative play. Starting with Sonic the Hedgehog 2, the series gave players a passive approach to co-op, with a second player able to control Tails with a camera that strictly follows Sonic, making it less of a true multiplayer option rather than a fun way to include a less-skilled player.

During my gameplay session with Superstars, I did not get a chance to play any co-op, nor did I get any real details on its implementation. However, in talking with Sonic Team creative officer Takashi Iizuka, I learned he and his team played a lot of co-op platformers (he specifically mentions the New Super Mario Bros. series) to get a sense of how to accomplish implementing this feature, but adding true co-op to a Sonic game is a different beast altogether.

"Sonic is a very fast, very speedy game, and up until now, having four players on the screen, it's not the same as the other multiplayer games, where it's a slower pace," he says. "Up until now, the cooperative gameplay was something that we could never really execute on and realize, so we wanted to take that on as a challenge for Superstars and say, 'We're going to make a cooperative four-player game and it's going to feel like a good Sonic game, while still retaining four-player co-op.'"



After choosing Sonic for my first few acts, I'm off into the world of Sonic Superstars. I'm met with a cutscene of Eggman hiring another familiar face to do his bidding. Fang the Hunter (previously known as Nack the Weasel and Fang the Sniper) from games like Sonic Triple Trouble and Sonic the Fighters once again joins forces with Dr. Eggman – this time to capture the giant animal inhabitants of the North Star Islands to turn into a strong mechanized army. After the transaction occurs, an alarm sounds, and the screen illuminates to show our heroes soaring past on Tails' iconic airplane, the Tornado.

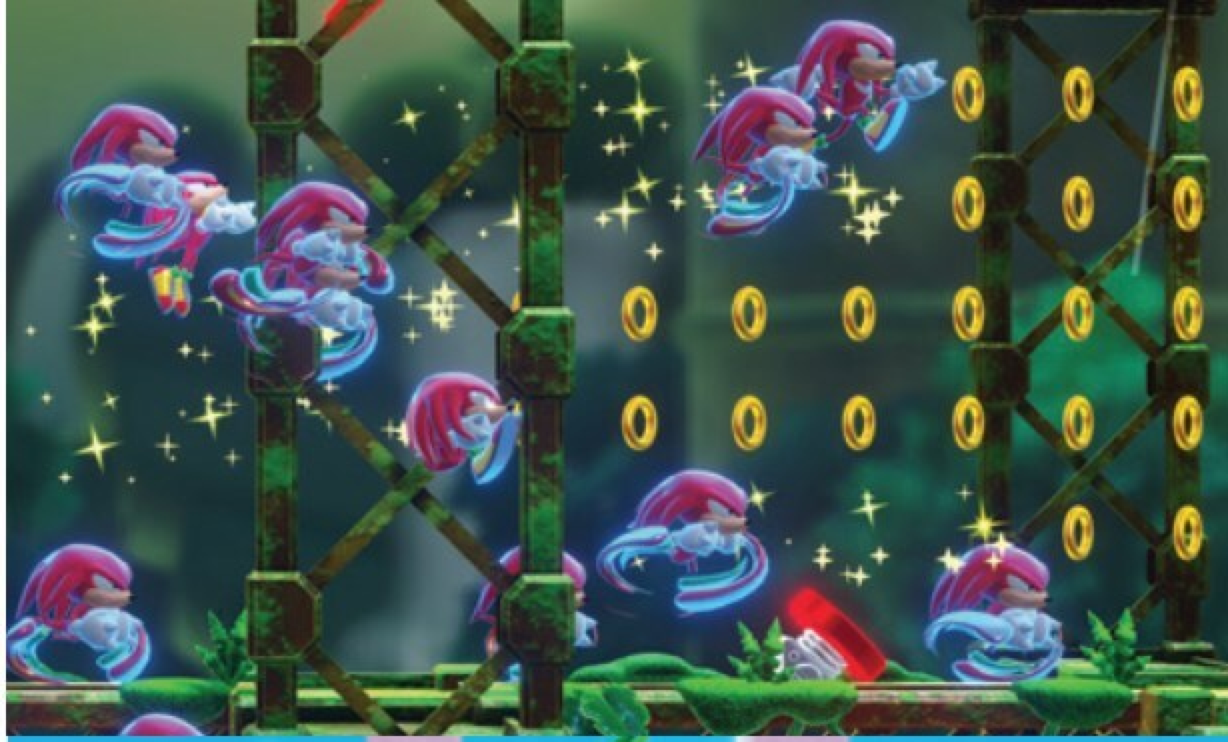
Classic Sonic fans sometimes feel like they're seeing their favorite band on a perpetual greatest-hits tour. Most recent side-scrolling releases in the Sonic the Hedgehog franchise are comprised solely of pre-existing content, as was the case with the Sonic Origins compilation, or feature only a few new zones alongside a majority of remixed existing zones, as was the case with Sonic Mania. Sonic Superstars holds higher ambitions. Consisting of entirely new zones, Sonic Superstars pulls inspiration from the past, while hopefully delivering something fresh and unique, without the sensation that you're visiting your old stomping grounds.

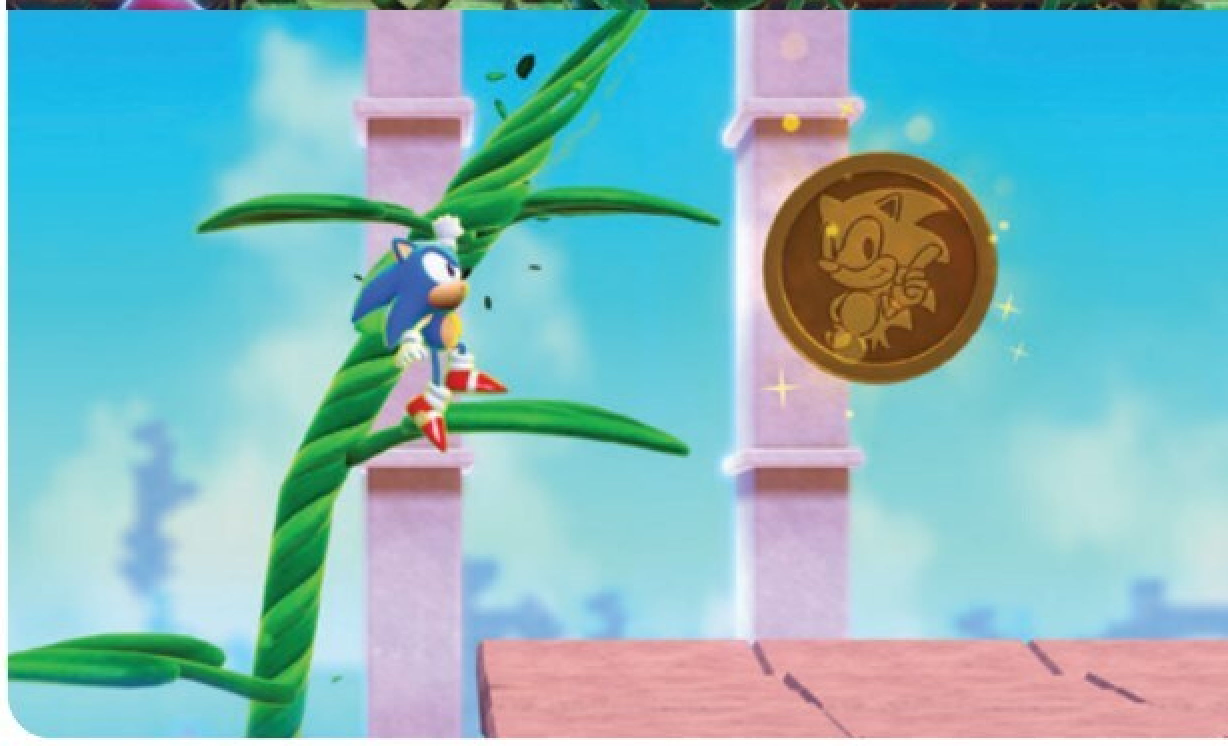
Though the first location, Bridge Island Zone, feels like a combination of Green Hill Zone and Emerald Hill Zone, it is wholly unique from these. "Well-known stages like Green Hill have made return appearances in many games, but that's because it was necessary from a story point of view," Iizuka says. "This time, Sonic Superstars is set on a brand-new island that hasn't been seen before, so we planned to have all-new stages from the beginning."

Bridge Island may feature similar themes as prior starting zones, with even some crossover on the enemies like Crabmeat, Buzz Bomber, and Chopper, but it also includes fun new wall-run sections. As I speed through the stage, I'm rewarded for exploration. It's safe to say that the branching-path level design so iconic within the Sonic franchise is back in full force in Sonic Superstars.

"Multi-pathways are one of the critical elements in designing a Classic Sonic 2D platformer," Iizuka says. "When you combine Sonic's speed with side-scrolling, there's no way to avoid sudden falls or places where you can't see where you will land. If you die every time that happens, you won't want to go fast. That's why multi-pathways are essential for level design; even if you fall, there's another route below, or if you play well, you can get to the path above."

Exploration is crucial in these stages, and perhaps that was what was most frustrating about my hands-on time with Sonic Superstars: I had time to play through most stages only once. I can't help but wonder what other secrets, discoveries, and paths await on repeated playthroughs.





THIS IS MY POWER

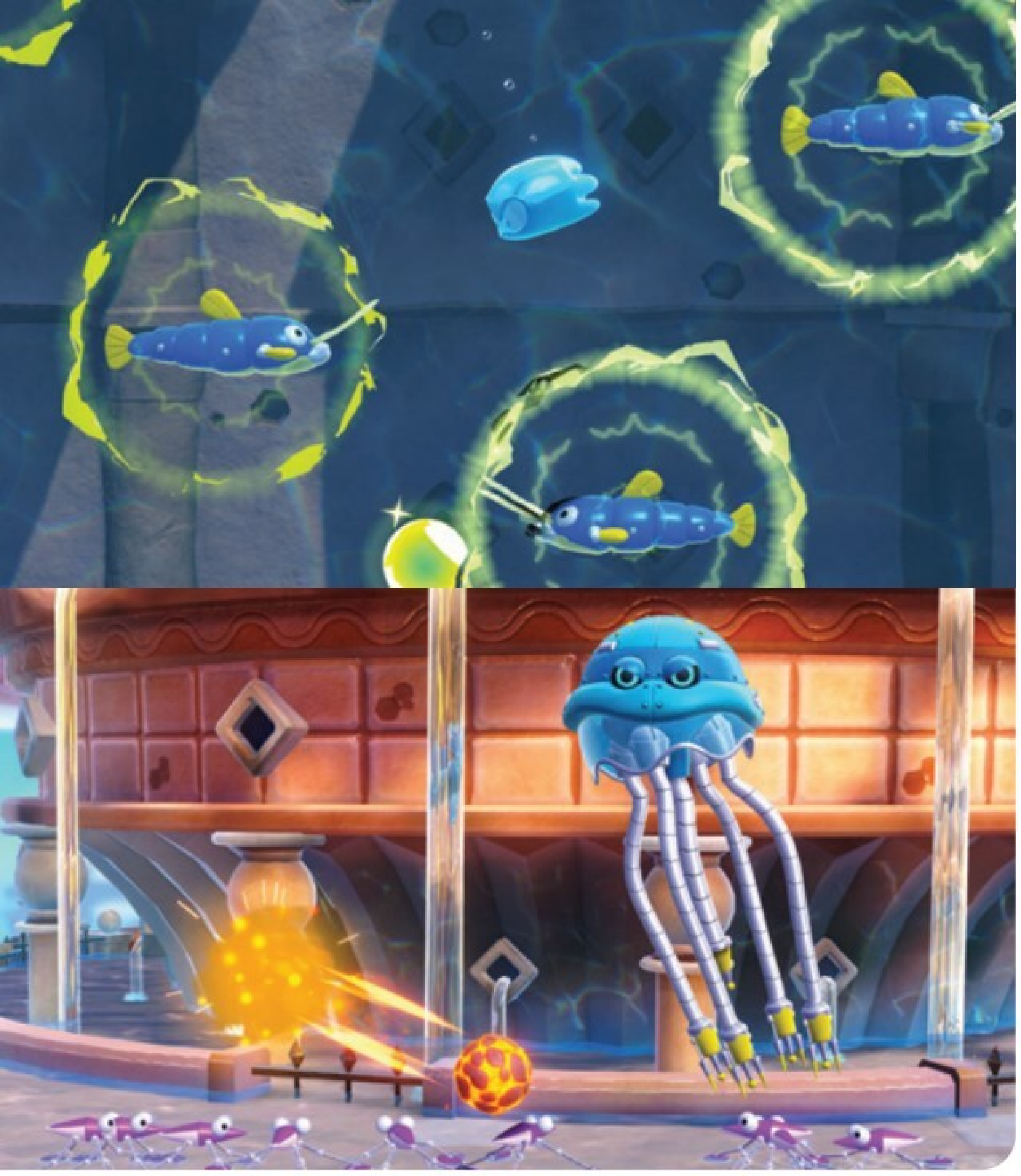
In Act 1 of Bridge Island Zone, I find two different power-ups: the traditional blue shield that debuted in Sonic 1, plus a magnet power-up that pulls rings to me. I also stumble upon a gold medal, which is used as customization currency (more on that later). I then discover a giant gold ring, similar to those found in Sonic 3 & Knuckles. I jump into the gold ring and am transported to a 3D environment; just like many side-scrolling Sonic games, Sonic Superstars breaks from its 2D plane for its special stages.

In these special stages, you swing from floating bubbles toward your goal. If you got to the special stage through a gold ring, that goal is a Chaos Emerald, whereas a giant blue ring's special stage goal is a stack of medals. Regardless of the destination, the mission is the same: Swing from the floating bubbles toward the moving objective. While most of the bubbles simply factor in your momentum and point of release, others can stop you dead in your tracks, while some objects send you flying toward the goal. In my first attempt, I successfully collect the blue Chaos Emerald.

Unlike past entries, where you only receive the benefits of collecting Chaos Emeralds once you collect all seven, Sonic Superstars gives you shorter-term satisfaction. "We wanted to say, 'How can we reward someone for getting just one?" Iizuka says. "And if we reward someone for getting just one, that will motivate people to get each individual one and see what they are. So, part of the new ideas and how Emerald Powers started was in that process of trying to get people excited about getting each individual Emerald."

In this instance, I receive the Avatar Emerald Power, which lets Sonic summon a legion of clones to run across the screen to defeat nearly anything in his path. Each Chaos Emerald grants a distinct Emerald Power (see sidebar), and all powers are available to each playable character. These powers are selected with the right stick and operate on a cooldown, with each star post checkpoint replenishing your cooldown meter.

The overarching idea for Emerald Powers draws inspiration from the Wisp mechanic found in the Modern series, starting with Sonic Colors. However, there is one key difference with Emerald Powers. "In Colors, you need to use the Wisps in order to get



around in the level and complete the game, but we didn't want that to be part of the Superstars game," Iizuka says. "We wanted the Classic Sonic gameplay to still remain true, so when we were looking at the Emerald Powers and the Wisps, we wanted to make sure you could still beat Superstars without having to use any of the powers, which is what we needed to balance during game design."

Immediately upon exiting the special stage, I witness the power of Avatar, as I select it with the right stick, then press the Emerald Power button to wipe the enemies on screen. As Iizuka pointed out, this immediately motivated me to collect more Chaos Emeralds. In past games, the goal of collecting seven Chaos Emeralds felt like a lofty objective I would achieve over the course of my adventure for the end goal of getting Super Sonic, but now, I'm excited to collect each individual Chaos Emerald to add to my repertoire of combat and traversal abilities.

Act 2 of this opening zone transitioned the setting from daytime to dusk and implemented boosted curves that helped with navigating the branching paths. However, after Act 1's boss battle, which was essentially just a chase sequence involving a giant fish robot, Act 2's boss battle is a proper fight against Eggman in a walker with boxing gloves. I decide this is a perfect opportunity to put the Avatar power to the test and send Sonic's clones at him in full force. Much to my delight, this takes him out, but in my excitement to use the power, I neglect to predict it was a multiple-phase fight. Eggman abandons the walker and flies toward Sonic with spikes that spin and a wave of electricity. This form looks intimidating, but nothing a well-timed jump can't handle. Just like that, I'm ready to move on to the next zone.

POWER UP

One of the biggest additions to the core Sonic the Hedgehog gameplay comes in the form of Emerald Powers. These powers grant Sonic and friends new abilities based on the Chaos Emeralds they collect over the course of their adventure. Though these powers let you pull off amazing feats, they are specifically not required to complete the game, and only serve as optional power-ups that operate on a cooldown once you obtain the specific Chaos Emerald. Check out the full list of Emerald Powers below.

Blue Emerald

Avatar – Clones of your character speed across the screen to defeat enemies

Green Emerald

Ivy –Vines grow up from where your character stands to help you reach new areas. You can even direct where they grow

Cyan Emerald

Water – Flowing water becomes traversable as your character can even climb up waterfalls

Red Emerald

Bullet – Your character can shoot like a cannonball in any direction

Purple Emerald

Vision – You can see hidden objects and platforms in the level while this power is active

Yellow Emerald

Slow – Everything around your character slows down temporarily

White Emerald

Extra – Your character gains a unique special attack (Sonic: Homing Attack, Tails: Tornado Spin, Knuckles: Punch, Amy: Hammer Throw)

Complete Collection

Super – Your character turns invincible and faster, with rings depleting over time

SIGHTSEEING

Following my time getting to know Sonic Superstars through the opening zone, I use the rest of my hands-on hours to see what other locales this game has to offer. Speed Jungle Zone Act 1 offers vines, both to grind on and to send you flying upward, alongside a mosquito robot boss fight that fires harpoons that stick in the ground so you can run up and attack. During Act 1, I even grab the red Chaos Emerald, which adds Bullet to my arsenal of Emerald Powers, enabling me to blast quickly in one direction. It initially doesn't feel as important as Avatar, but I'm sure I'll find a use for it in the future.

After completing Act 1, I'm given the option to play Act 2, or a different section called "Act Sonic." This alternate act of Speed Jungle Zone lets you run through the stage as Sonic, but with Fang terrorizing you the whole way. I don't get any additional context as to what incentivizes you to play this seemingly optional, more challenging stage, which ends in a chase scene where you need to run away from Fang, but it feels like there may be some reason to complete these character-specific levels.

I also get a glimpse of the world map, which is reminiscent of Sonic Generations' hub where you are running around a 2D plane and selecting your zone. In addition to the various zones on offer, I also find the in-game shop, where I can trade collected medals for customization parts. The menu in the build I'm playing gives me the option to acquire custom parts for head, body, arms, legs, accessories, color, pattern, and something called "prototype." I'm not sure how customization will work, and Iizuka plays coy when I ask him about it, so sadly, I don't have any additional information on it beyond the fact that it exists and there will be a Lego collaboration for a Sonic and Eggman skin at launch.

I take this opportunity to change to Knuckles and use his glide and climb ability to make it through Speed Jungle Zone Act 2, which I played through as Sonic during a different hands-on session. Once I defeat the boss of Act 2, a giant armored ball you must goad into attacking itself, I'm on to Sky Temple Zone.

Just as Bridge Island Zone takes cues from other iconic starting zones in Sonic's history, Sky Temple Zone takes some inspiration from Sky Sanctuary Zone from Sonic 3 & Knuckles, but with different badniks and even a repeated minigame reminiscent of the classic game Breakout, where your character becomes a ball and you need to aim to break through various bricks. Sky Temple Zone is unique in that Act 1 takes me around nine minutes to complete, but is the only act of the zone.

As I near the end of Sky Temple, a massive storm hits, and everything starts floating. This changes the feeling of the stage, similar to how Windy Valley in Sonic Adventure was briefly turned on its head during the tornado sequence. However, in Sky Temple, the storm persists into the boss encounter against Eggman, which is one of the more challenging ones I played; I died a few times here thanks to a shortage of rings in the battle, but the silver lining is I learned Superstars doesn't operate on a traditional lives system.

Eggman smashes the ground, and you need to avoid his projectiles as you fall. From there, you climb up floating blocks until you reach the top to damage the evil doctor. This repeats, with each ascent becoming trickier. Finally, I put an end to the battle, save the animals he had captured, and witness a stage transition to the next zone.

Since the early games, Sonic's journeys have brought him to several pinball-themed stages, and that tradition carries on through the aptly named Pinball Carnival Zone. The zone is largely self-explanatory, with a giant pinball area and fast sequences with fireworks setting off. True to the theme, the Act 1 boss is a clown robot. Here, you need to flip medallions it places in the battleground to stun it. Dodging its bombs can be a little tricky while you're trying to spin the remaining medallions (during the later placements, I use the Bullet Emerald Power to reach some of the trickier spots), but it's a rather straightforward affair.

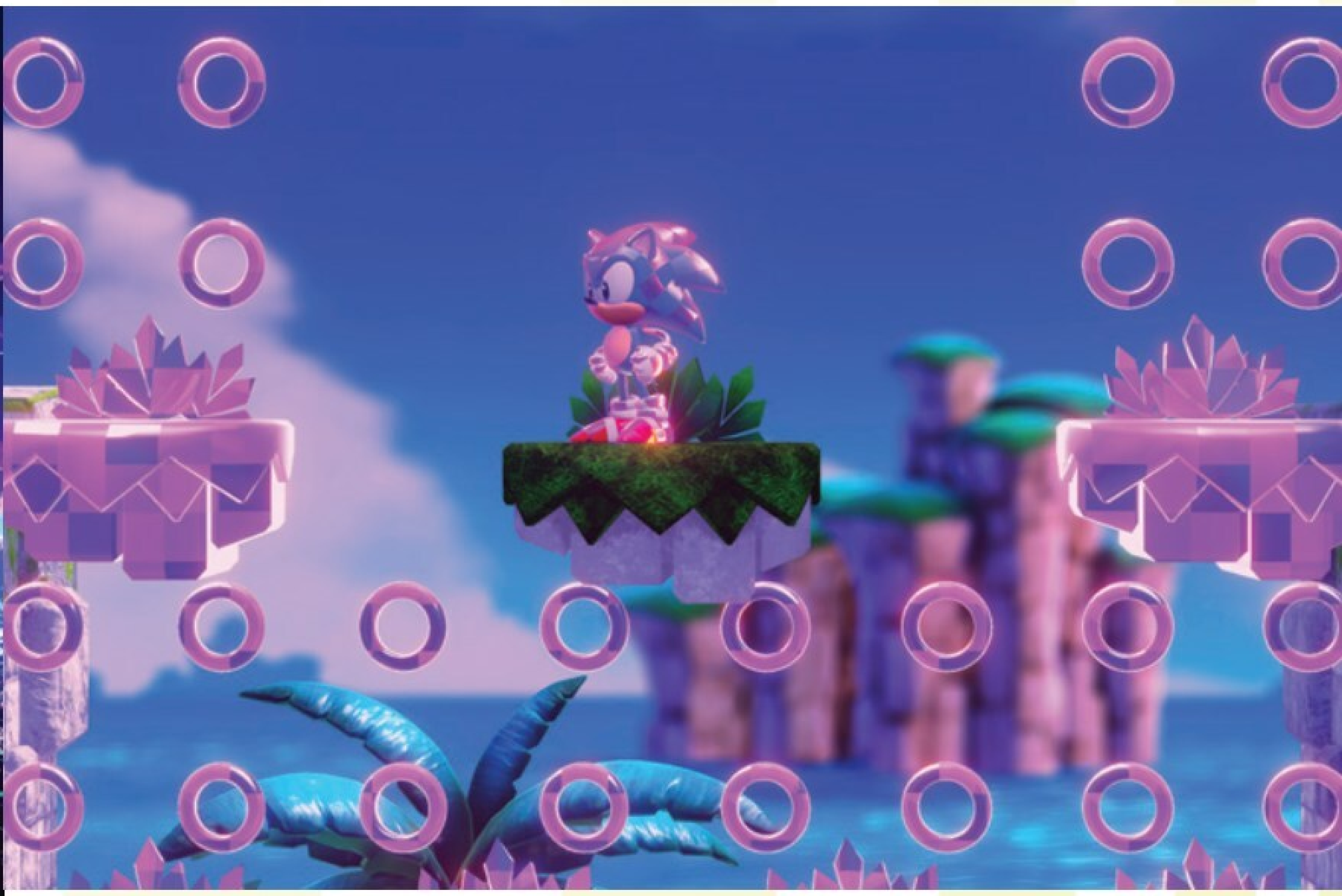
For Pinball Carnival Zone Act 2, I switch to Tails. The yellow fox can fly and attack from below, but that doesn't do me much good in this stage. Act 2 of this zone transitions the area to nighttime, with a haunted carnival theme emerging and the badniks taking on a ghostly aesthetic. This act also adds platforms that fly forward, with some sequences requiring you to jump between them to survive.

At the end of Act 2, I take on Eggman once again. This time, he brings a roulette wheel, which he uses to throw bombs my way. After avoiding his attacks, I use the wheel to catapult myself at him, but he protects himself with ghost spirits, similar to his shield at the end of Metropolis Zone in Sonic 2. I dispatch him in relatively short order and continue my tour of Sonic Superstars.

Lagoon City, with its submerged city ruins and multitude of water slides, awaits me. I'm typically not a fan of water levels, so I'm thankful I brought Tails since he can swim. Act 1 takes place mostly above water, and ends with a battle against a jellyfish robot that spawns smaller robots and can electrocute the water. Act 2 transitions to include some fully underwater sequences, which I wish I had a chance to play as someone other than Tails; I'm interested to learn how easy or difficult they are without the ability to swim.

The Act 2 boss of Lagoon City pits you against Eggman in a crusher machine. After he floods the arena, you need to avoid his drill attacks to damage him. In the first phase, this is a vertical fight, but it transitions to a horizontal battle in the second phase.

The boss battles of Sonic Superstars are among my favorite I've encountered in the series alongside Sonic 3 & Knuckles. Speaking with Iizuka, there may be a reason why they feel similar in that way. "We thought about the boss fights like Sonic 3, with a mech sub-boss after Act 1 and an Eggman boss after Act 2," he says. "I wrote boss fight specifications for Sonic 3, drawing on that experience to work with Arzest staff on the design."



AN UNFAMILIAR FACE

Before going to the next zone, I take on Episode Amy, a character-specific stage in Lagoon City Zone. This fruit-themed stage lets me use Amy's hammers to blast through huge fruit and fruit-based robots, including a grape robot and a watermelon with a gun. Near the end of the stage, I find an armored character who looks lost. Amy offers to help this creature and the rest of the stage becomes an escort mission of sorts, with Amy carrying her, unable to attack.

This character is Trip, a creation of Ohshima – his first new character created for the Sonic franchise in decades. Ohshima worked closely with Iizuka to come up with ideas for the new character. "We sent visuals back and forth and had an ongoing dialog about what the personality should be like," Ohshima says. "Ideas came up for the character's actions and themes, like an armored lizard and the ouroboros. I worked on the design while discussing the ideas with Iizuka-san."

I don't have any indication about what role the new character plays in the story, but I don't have long to dwell on that; my time with Sonic Superstars is coming to a close. I take the opportunity to speedrun Sand Sanctuary Zone. Fans of Sonic 3 & Knuckles may draw comparisons to Sandopolis Zone, and it wouldn't be an unfair line to connect. After dodging the spike balls and taking down the Skorps and Vultrons throughout the stage, I clash with Eggman one final time before I need to relinquish the controller. This time, he's in a drill machine that resembles his Grounder bots. He sends out badniks and burrows underground before popping back up to destroy your platforms. In that moment, you can attack him, and after a few stalled attacks on my part, I finally destroy him.

All I see of the next zone is that it's called Press Factory Zone, but the team turns the game off before I can take in any details, and my hands-on session ends.

KEEPING THE MOMENTUM THIS TIME

With Sonic Superstars looking like an excellent return to the series' roots in a more modern way, the brand is poised to continue the upward trajectory it has charted over the last decade. Prior to that, it's no secret the franchise was struggling to produce a consistent level of quality, but the last 10 years have improved the brand's standing in both the gaming landscape and pop culture at large.

"I moved to Los Angeles seven years ago, and seven years ago, Sonic was in a really hard place," Iizuka says. "But I came to Los Angeles to help the team kind of rebuild and bring Sonic back. That's what everyone wanted to do: take us from that hard place and bring Sonic back to where Sonic always has been. And we feel like we've done it not only with games and with TV shows, but even with movies. We've really revitalized Sonic."

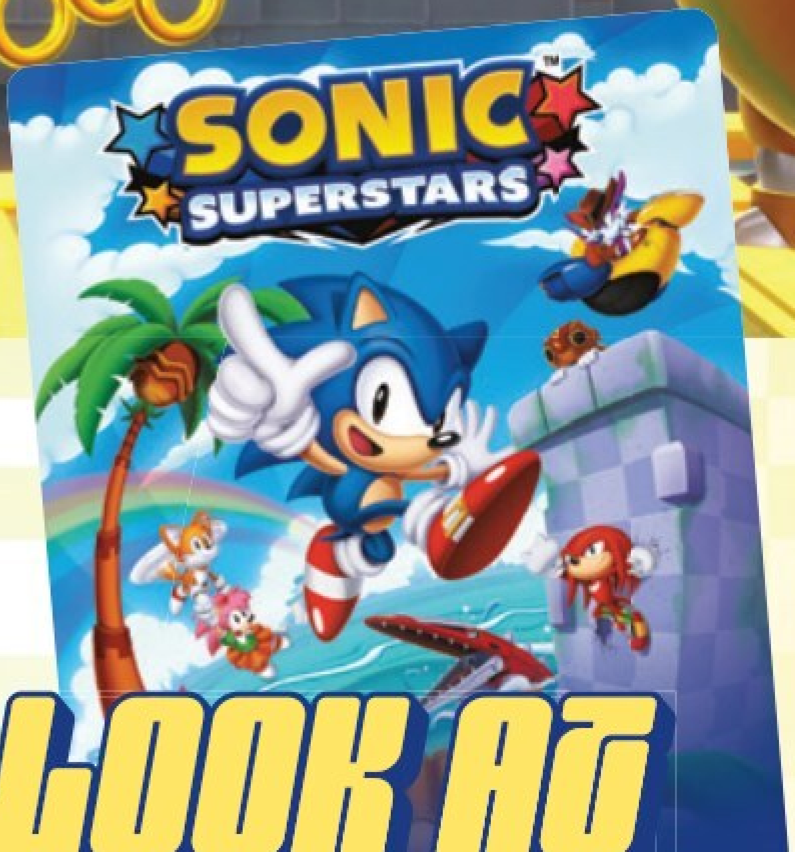
The bounce back may seem like catching lightning in a bottle, but this was carefully orchestrated by the studio's leadership, including Iizuka and chief brand and business officer Ivo Gerscovich, who joined the team in 2015. In my 2016 interview with him, Gerscovich laid out a plan for getting the series back to the high level of quality players expect, and while talk is cheap, much of what he told me back then has come to fruition.

"Over the past decade, the Sonic the Hedgehog brand has set its sights on catering to a multigenerational audience," Gerscovish tells me today. "As a brand, we work across teams to constantly think of how we can evolve, how we do things, and consistently surprise and delight our audiences. We're never satisfied with the status quo, and so we challenge ourselves to do things differently."

Despite the roadmap being laid out long ago, the degree to which the team has succeeded is a surprise to many, including Iizuka. "It's really hard to believe," he says. "Seven years ago, I don't think we could have imagined all of this would actually be coming true. But it is. We're living it now and it's really good. And that was even one of the ideas behind Sonic Superstars. We want to deliver that 2D, Classic Sonic gameplay to a really wide audience and get people to play it, enjoy it, and experience all the fun."

For longtime Sonic fans, it may feel like a pipe dream to say the brand will once again be as strong as it was during the '90s or early '00s, but Sonic Superstars hopes to kick in the door with an emphatic statement: Not only was Sonic Mania not a fluke, but it was just the start of a full-on revitalization of the Classic branch of the series. When you combine that with the continued success of the live-action and animated series, the ongoing comics, and the promising Modern Sonic foundation laid by Sonic Frontiers, even by Sonic's standards, the future can't get here fast enough. ■

For exclusive video interviews with the development team, head to GameInformer.com/SonicSuperstars



A LOOK AT THE OTHER SIDE

As a special bonus for those who purchase the physical version of Sonic Superstars, Sega includes an exclusive reversible cover by Mark Hughes, the same artist who created the cover art of this issue of *Game Informer*.

THE MUSICAL WITH MILLIONS OF ENDINGS

The story behind the songs of *Stray Gods: The Roleplaying Musical*

by Charles Harte

For composer Austin Wintory, Stray Gods started with a rejected pitch.

Five years ago, when he was invited to a pre-GDC meeting to pitch game ideas to an unnamed friend, Wintory had one that really excited him. It was a musical game – not just a game with musical numbers distributed throughout, but where the player has control over the music itself. Wintory's friend was less than enthusiastic.

"He said very graciously, but in no uncertain terms, 'I hate that idea, and I want nothing to do with that,'" Wintory recalls. He smiles as he tells the story, finding humor in the irony that this rejected pitch eventually became the game I'm currently interviewing him about.

While his unnamed friend wasn't interested, he did point Wintory towards Liam Esler, a developer with similar ambitions for finding new ways to create choice-based narrative games. At this point, Wintory "literally sprinted" across town to meet with Esler before their flight back to Australia. After chatting about their love for musicals (specifically, the musical episode of *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer*), the partnership between Wintory and Esler's Summerfall Studios was born.

The game they would eventually create is Stray Gods: The Roleplaying Musical. It follows Grace (played by veteran video game performer Laura Bailey), a woman who must prove her innocence in a murder case using the newly gained powers of a muse, which compels people near her to express themselves in the form of song. The world is a modern take on Greek myth, with many classic gods (now known as "idols") appearing, including Apollo, Persephone, and Athena. Gameplay is a twist on the choice-based role-playing genre; in addition to choosing dialogue options during conversations, players pick lyrics during musical numbers, altering the story and the music simultaneously.

Managing a branching story is a difficult enough task, but injecting a musical element also requires a baffling amount of effort and coordination. While Wintory doesn't say exactly what turned this friend off from helping with this game, he (along with every other Stray Gods team member I speak to) can't help but bring up the game's mind-boggling scope. It's a daunting project, especially for an indie studio's debut game, and raises a question I'm dying to get the answer to:

How did they figure out how to write a musical with millions of endings?

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Humble Games
DEVELOPER Summerfall Studios **RELEASE** August 10

STRAY GODS
THE ROLEPLAYING MUSICAL
TROY BAKER
Voice Director
AUSTIN WINTORY
Music Director

TROY BAKER
Voice Director
Rahul Kohli

Music Beyond Measure

Wintory is Stray Gods' composer and music director, working closely with the narrative team and a crew of songwriters to assemble the songs and score. But while Wintory has written music for huge games, such as Journey and Assassin's Creed Syndicate, there's never been a game with a scale quite like Stray Gods.

"A song that only ever has three options at a time might end up with, quite literally, thousands of permutations," Wintory says. "In the case of the finale of the game, literally tens of millions."

Numbers get this big because it's not as simple as choosing red, blue, or green options. In many instances, choices you make earlier in the song (and sometimes earlier in the plot) come back to change the responses you currently face. Being nice to a character twice in a row is different than being nice, then mean, or vice versa. Each of those sections gets its own lyrics and, in many cases, largely altered backing tracks.

Here's another way of looking at the numbers: In one of the earliest songs, Grace is deciding how to proceed. She can side with her best friend, Freddie, the mischievous idol Pan, or choose to go it alone. While the song only has three verses, three choruses, two pre-choruses, and a bridge, the number of decisions creates 38 distinct sections of music that must be written and recorded. That's at least four times the amount of effort, assuming you don't consider the extra planning needed to coordinate each path. And this is just for an early song – as the story proceeds, the number of variables in each encounter only increases.

To capture as much of this branching story as possible, Wintory plans to release the soundtrack as a series of four albums. Each will roughly summarize a play style, but still, "at best, [give] a kind of outline of what's there," he says. Wintory tells me there's a total of six hours of music in the game, a runtime that dwarfs every other soundtrack of his I was able to find, but it's unclear if every minute of that will make it onto these soundtracks.

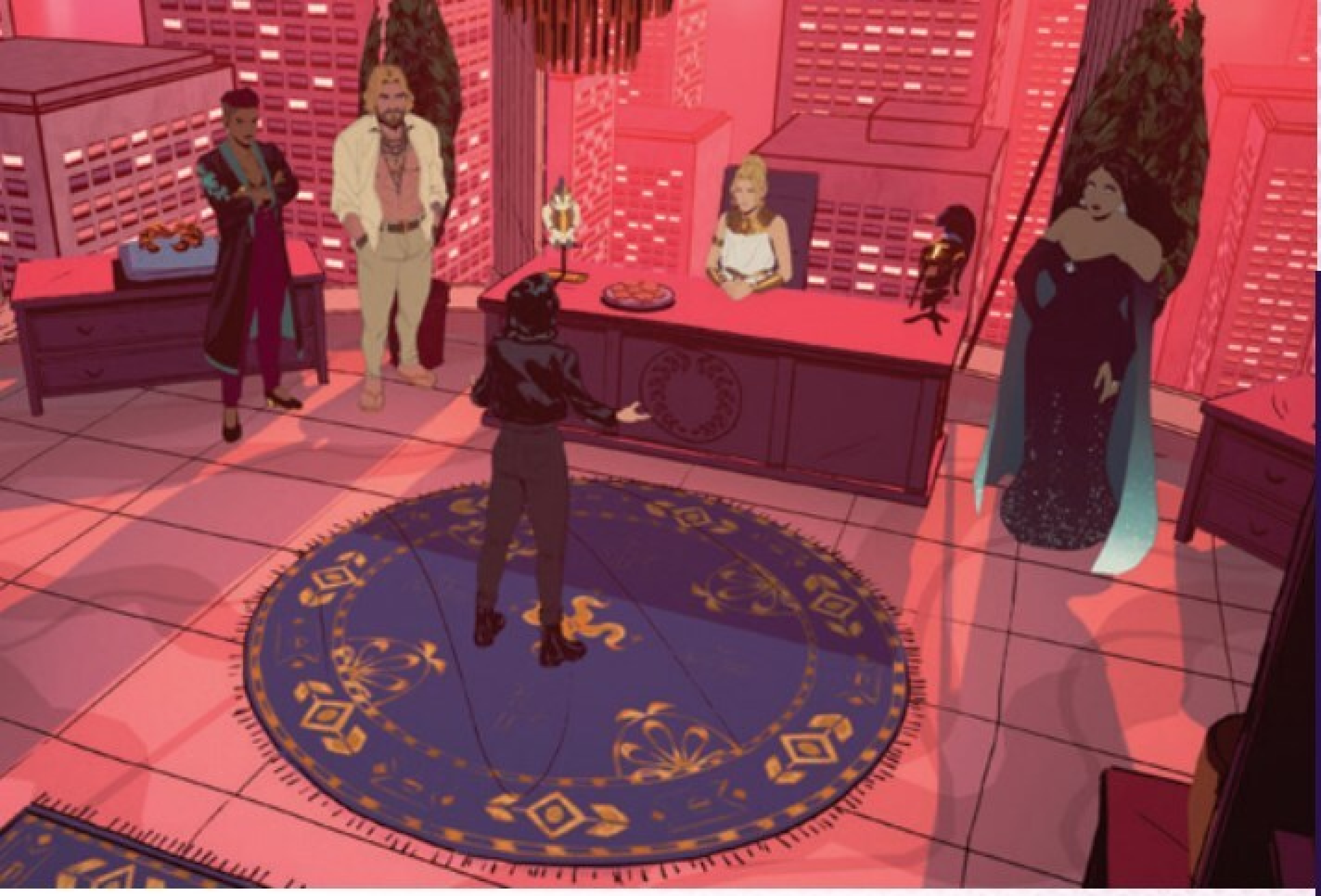
When it came time to assemble a team of songwriters, Wintory stresses the importance of each musician being familiar with video games and dialogue trees. Tripod, an Australian musical comedy trio, was an easy pick, due to their prior work with Wintory, especially on projects like This Gaming Life and Syndicate. Originally, Tripod would just help with lyrics, but its contributions quickly bled into the musical side of things as well.

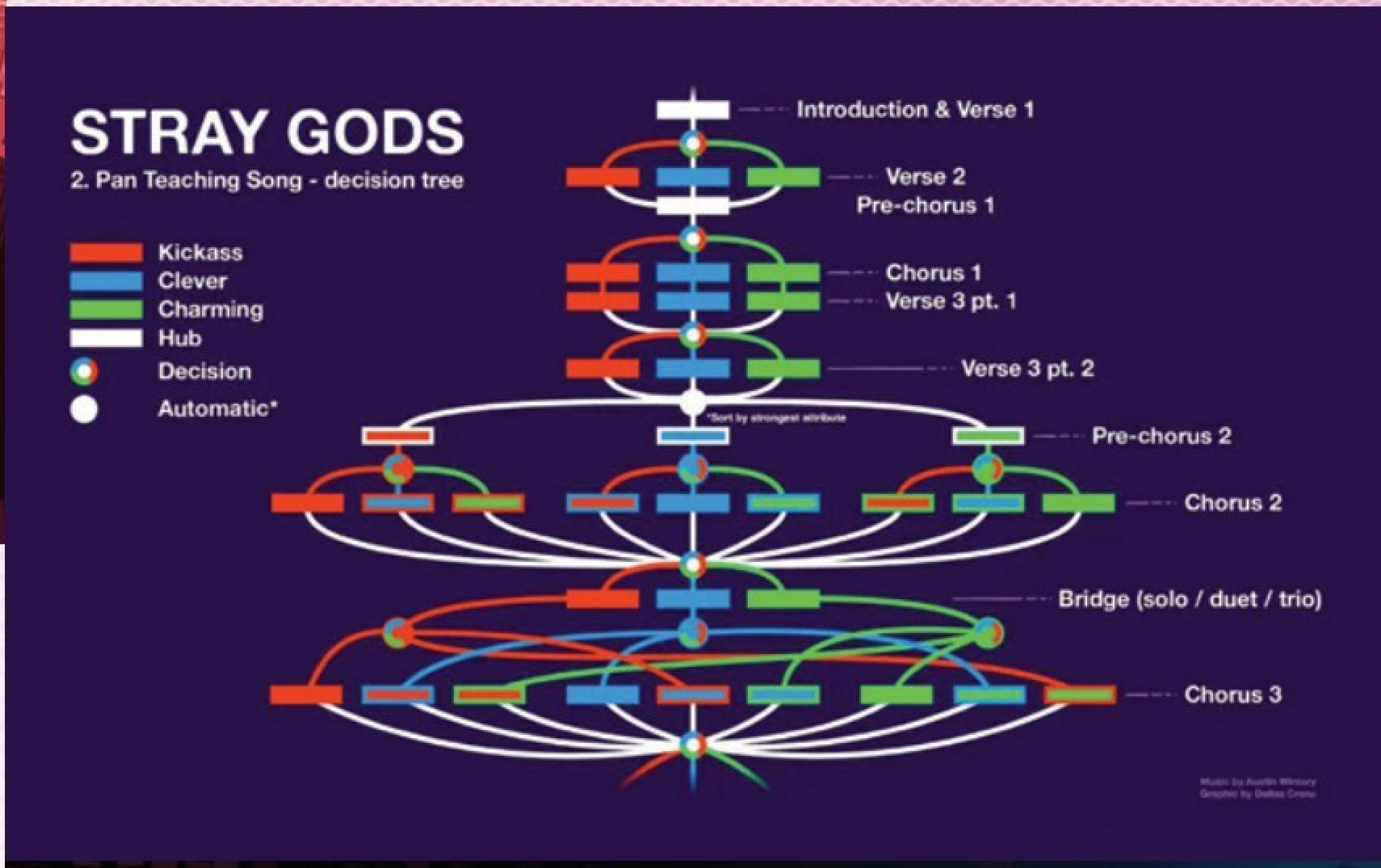
Eventually, the team found itself with too much work and not enough people, so it started looking into recruiting another songwriter. At the top of their list was Australian Eurovision participant Montaigne, but before Summerfall could reach out to gauge their interest in writing music for a video game, Montaigne made the first move, tweeting, "seriously though. let me write music for your video game." Just like that, the music team grew from four to five.

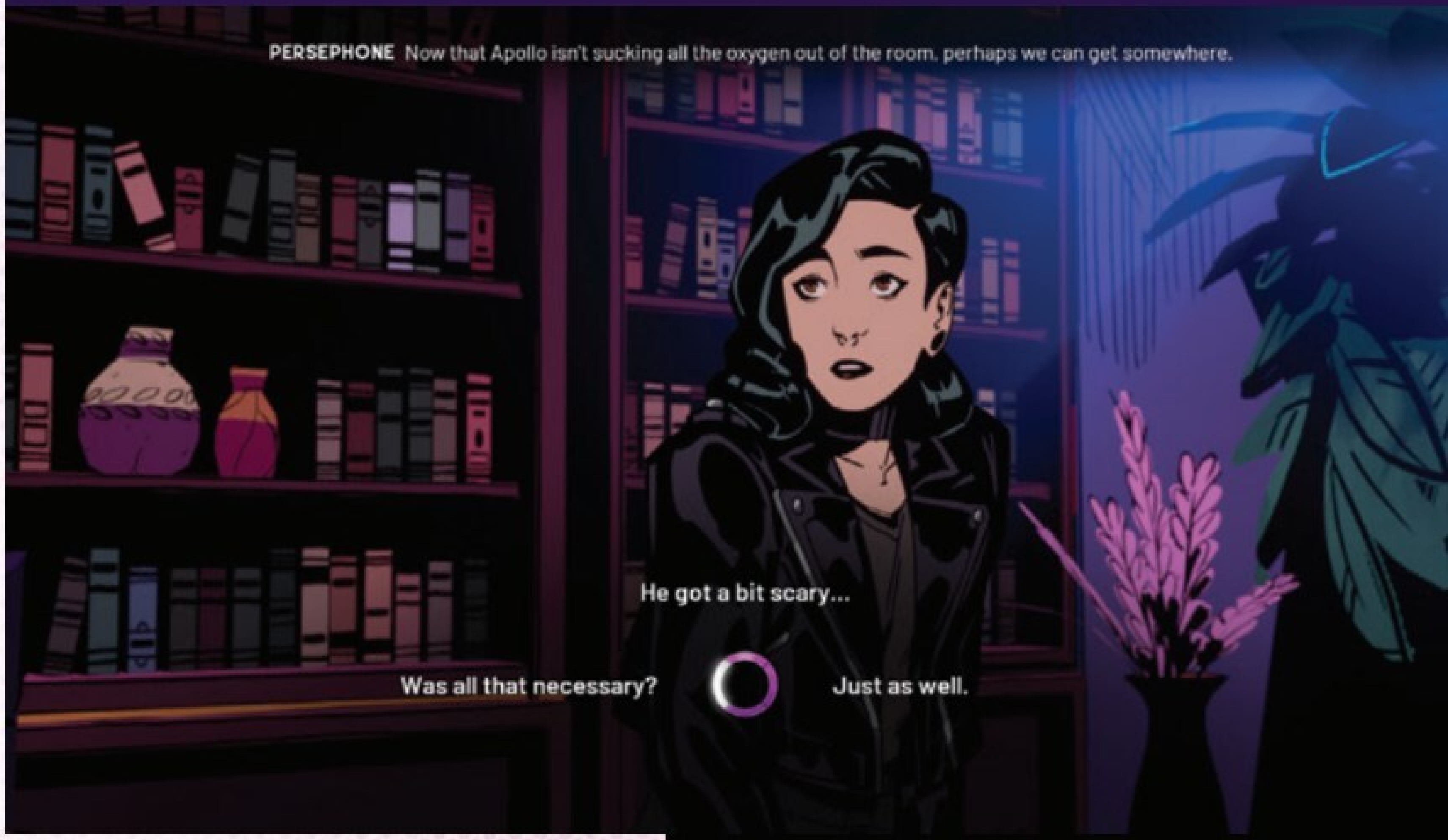
A Pantheon of Performers

When songs were ready, Wintory, voice director Troy Baker (The Last of Us, Bioshock Infinite), and creative director David Gaider all hopped in a recording session with the performers. But the process of writing songs was as non-linear as the songs themselves; according to Wintory, even when the lyrics were in a finished state, singers would sing over "the most bare bones of backing tracks," not much more than basic piano chords or an iPhone recording of a guitar.

Baker, who sits in on my interview with Wintory, says this simplicity is deliberate. He speaks not



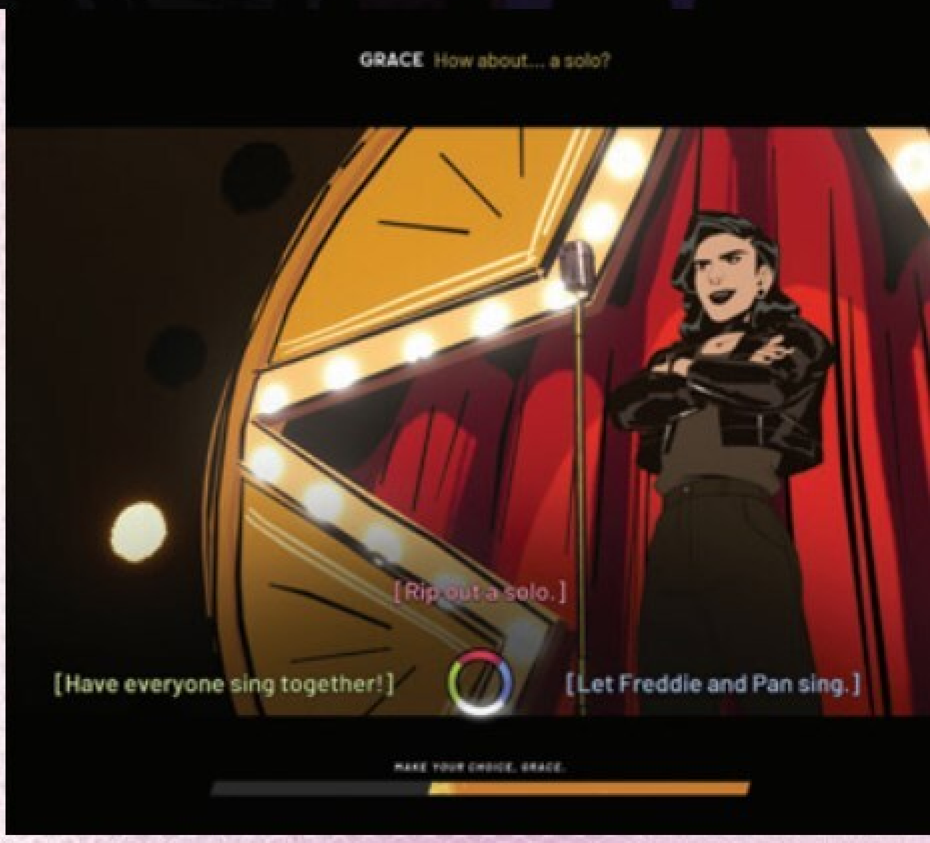



PERSEPHONE Now that Apollo isn't sucking all the oxygen out of the room, perhaps we can get somewhere.

He got a bit scary...

Was all that necessary?

Just as well.


GRACE How about... a solo?

[Rip out a solo.]

[Have everyone sing together!]

[Let Freddie and Pan sing.]

MAKE YOUR CHOICE, GRACE.

just as Stray Gods' voice director but as the voice of Apollo, one of the main love interests. He says, "Austin said, from the onset, 'I want you to understand it's important to all of us that you have authorship in this performance, and that will be reflected in the arrangement and orchestration of this song. I want the song to come to you, not for you to come to the song.'" Wintory verifies this, later adding that songs might shift entire genres based on how the singer performs.

This places an immense amount of trust in the game's cast, which is shockingly star-studded. "They didn't audition," Baker says. The group was picked specifically to make the recording process as efficient as possible. "We didn't have the margin of error that a lot of triple-A titles or even large indie titles had," Baker continues. "We had to get this right. We had it budgeted down to the hour of the session with each actor."

Recordings themselves could get particularly tricky, even for experienced singers. Between songs and dialogue, everyone had to keep track of where any given option was in the story and adjust accordingly. Baker says the first recording session is a confrontational song between Grace and Medusa (played by Anjali Bhimani), and it was the first time they really figured out what the recording process would look like. When I ask why that song came first, Wintory and Baker each have different replies. Wintory says that it was probably the most finished song at that point and relatively simple in the way it branched out because it's a pretty contained sequence. Meanwhile, Baker laughs, saying they just needed to start somewhere.

"Nothing was on purpose," he chuckles.

Weeks after the interview, this quote sticks out to me for several reasons. I set out to investigate the songwriting process because it seemed impossibly large and coordinated, but I was told many tales of people improvising and scrambling to make things work. Stray Gods is a game born out of a rejected pitch, produced remotely during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, where singers (none of whom auditioned) recorded vocals, some of which were written by a musician that joined because of a tweet, all over unfinished tracks of music, to be arranged and orchestrated later.

"Nothing was on purpose" is clearly a joke – it's evident that a lot of effort was put into every part of this game, and there's no implication that the project was completed by accident. And yet, it's indicative of how meandering and frantic the creative process can feel, even when you've got some of the most decorated professionals in the gaming industry in a room together. Years later, Stray Gods is done, and its release date is upon us. It remains to be seen how the game will be received and whether the risks will pay off, but I got an answer to my biggest question.

How did they know how to write a musical with millions of endings? The answer is simple: at first, they didn't. What inspires me is that they wrote it anyways. ■

Previews

spotlight

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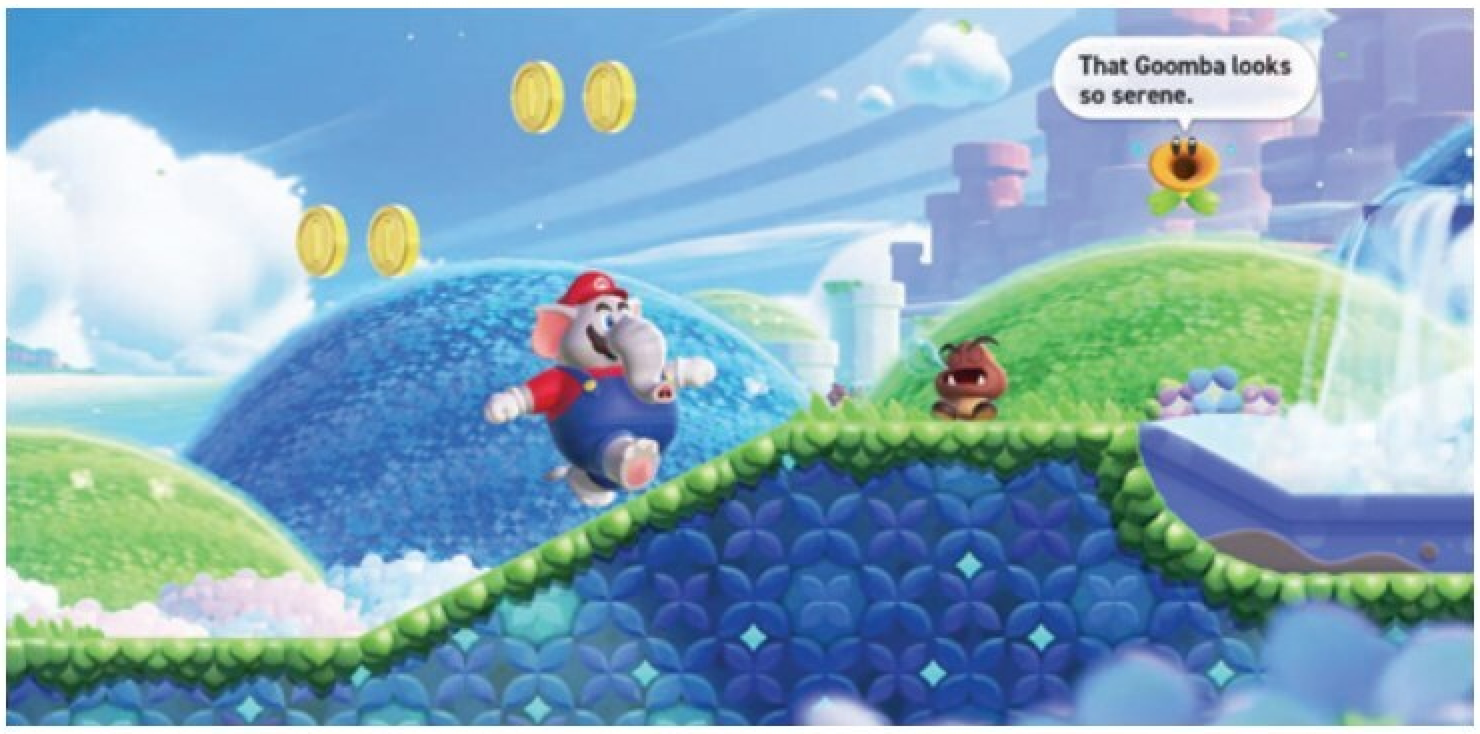
SUPER MARIO BROS. WONDER

Coming to life

Fans of classic side-scrolling Mario action have long waited for a fundamentally new entry, and that dry spell ends this October. On the heels of Mario's success as a Hollywood blockbuster, Super Mario Bros. Wonder seems to be doubling down on making Mario and his friends more approachable and fun – and the situations he encounters more surprising and bizarre than ever.

Wonder features a gorgeous art style reveling in the fun-loving and humorous personality of the Mario franchise. While remaining a true 2D game, a more rounded and three-dimensional quality is infused into each of the onscreen characters, helping each to pop on the screen. Animations focus on incidental body motions and facial expressions far more than before; Mario bubbles with excitement as he snags a power-up or his hat from within a pipe as he zips inside. From cheerful jumps to slides along new rails, the characters emote far more clearly than in any prior game.

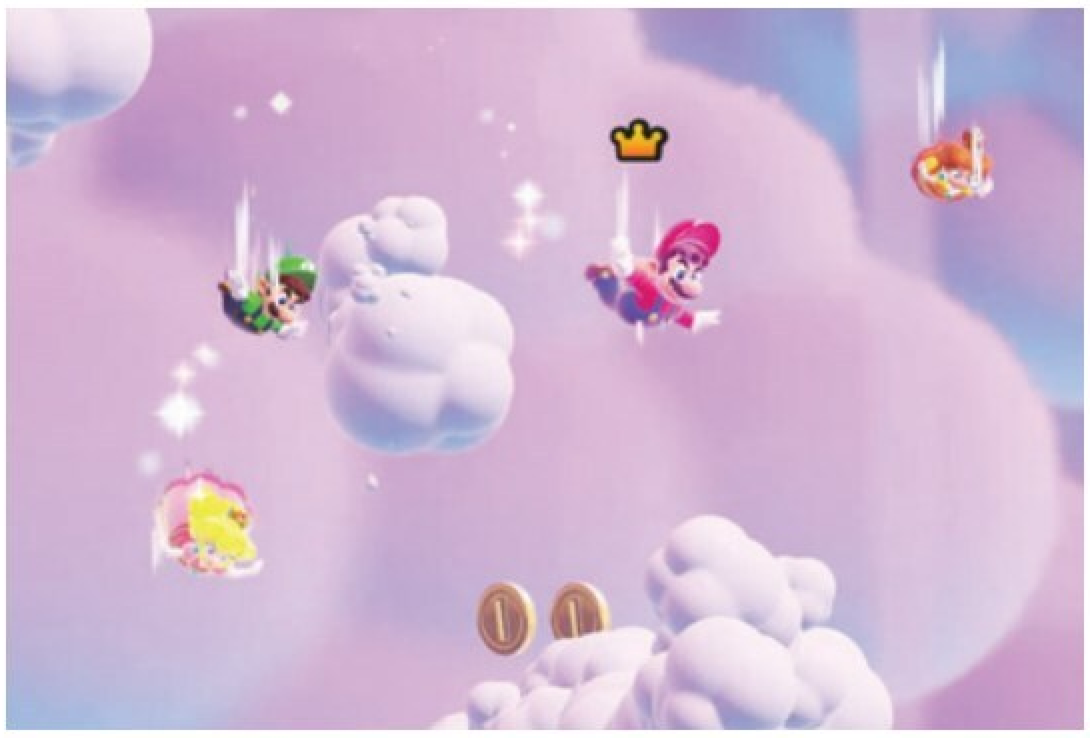
New power-ups are abundant, but many seem tied to a specific pick-up called the Wonder Flower, whose effects differ depending on the level and circumstance. One Wonder Flower adds a psychedelic twist to the surrounding stage, making the environment shift, sometimes drastically, around Mario. Another turns him into a giant spiked ball (complete with mustache and pronounced nose) that rolls through the stage, smashing through everything he encounters. A separate power-up turns Mario into a bulky elephant version of himself, though it's unclear what he can do with that long trunk and sizeable waistband expansion.



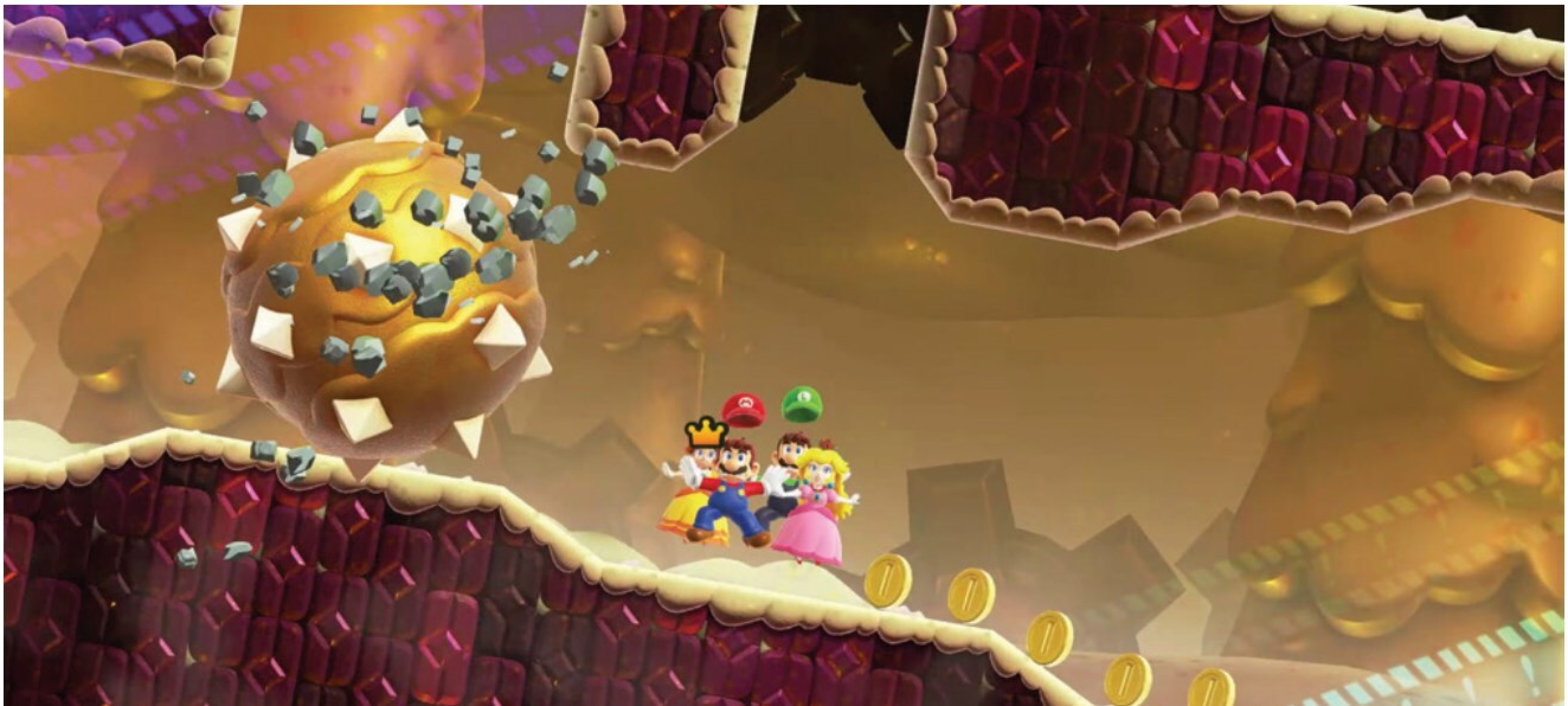
Wonder follows in the footsteps of the "New Super Mario" games by including 4-player multiplayer. Even before launch, we already know Princess Daisy and Yoshi join Mario, Luigi, Princess Peach, and Toad as playable characters.

The new levels look bright and beautiful, with pronounced variety from one to the next. In one, we see Mario leap into the heavy rainfall an overhead cloud produces and swim up to its top. In another, he bounces and careens between a herd of ball-shaped purple hippos. At one point, Princess Peach emerges into a foreground section of the level while the other playable characters are still moving along a background plane. At another point, Peach and Mario navigate a lengthy gap by holding out hats that act as parachutes to slow their descent.

It's clear we're meant to take the game's title at face value, as it aims to instill a sense of joy and wonder in the small moments and places that make up the game. There's every reason to suspect a memorable and amusing adventure from Mario and his pals, and our early glimpse suggests the quality level we've come to expect from the series. If it turns out the way we all hope, Nintendo will have another benchmark 2023 game to celebrate alongside the earlier success of the Zelda franchise – and this one is just in time for holidays with the family. **BY MATT MILLER**



PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1 to 4-Player Platforming
PUBLISHER Nintendo **DEVELOPER** Nintendo **RELEASE** October 20



PAYDAY 3

Evolution, not reinvention

In the profitable but dangerous career of bank heisting, you never truly pull off that one last job. The narrative of Payday 2 concluded with the gang finally getting enough money to claim retirement, but surprise! They're getting pulled back in for a whole new set of heists. After their bank accounts are inexplicably and mysteriously emptied, they're forced to put their masks back on a couple hundred more times – if the game can get its hooks into you.

On a core level, Payday 3 continues what was successful about the first two games. You and three friends join to pull off a bank heist. Heavily inspired by films like Heat, that heist often goes awry, and you must figure out how to get out of the situation alive and with your money. Many of Payday 3's updates are small but positive improvements to that formula. There are also far more customization options for elements like masks and guns.

I played two rounds with developer Starbreeze, the first of which was a familiar but enthralling heist at a city bank. The second was a job at an art gallery where our goal was to collect valuable art pieces instead of bags of cash.

We began the bank heist with what Starbreeze refers to as "mask-off gameplay." During this introductory section, which is not new to Payday but is greatly expanded for the sequel, I explored the bank, took note of security guards, marked cameras for my teammates, and even snuck my way into a section of the bank civilians aren't supposed to enter. Things are going smoothly and quietly until a security guard notices me trying to pick the lock on a door. At that point, we all throw our masks on and engage.

I command the civilians in the bank to take cover while other team members go upstairs to start melting the floor above the vault to enter it from above. For Payday 3, there are more options related to hostage negotiation. While we throw combustible fuel in the device to enter the vault, another team member trades hostages with the police outside in exchange for more time.

The fragile peace does not last, though, and the police make their way in as we enter the vault. One team member fills bags with cash and sprints them outside to where our getaway van is scheduled to show up at any moment. The shootout is intense, and me and other team members go down and need to be saved multiple times. We all survived and got the cash to the van, but we did not recover all of it.

The art gallery heist plays out differently as the team and I spend more time in stealth. I learned my lesson trying to pick a lock in front of a security guard. The art heist is much more complicated, but in an interesting way that I can see being particularly fun after learning the process in more detail. The gallery is full of real and fake pieces, and I use a spectrometer to identify the correct ones worth stealing.

Of course, one of us makes a mistake, and the heist concludes with all of us grabbing art – even the fake pieces, which still have some value – throwing them into a helicopter on the roof and flying off to safety. Or at least, the rest of my team does. I don't make it off the roof, but thankfully still receive some rewards and currency for my efforts.

Payday 3 is not a radical new approach to what made the first two games successful. Payday already has a dedicated, enthusiastic community, and Starbreeze recognizes this. The development team refers to it as an evolution, not a reinvention, and playing the game confirms that it is probably the right approach.

BY KYLE HILLIARD

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1 to 4-Player Online Shooter
PUBLISHER Deep Silver **DEVELOPER** Starbreeze Studios **RELEASE** September 21

BATTLE SHAPERS

Gunning for success

Battle Shapers tosses a medley of seemingly disparate franchises and styles, from Mega Man to Overwatch to Hades, into a giant blender forming a promising amalgamation of ideas. The upcoming roguelite shooter comes from Metric Empire, a small team headed by ex-Ubisoft veterans.

Speaking to the team members, they describe Battle Shapers as a single-player shooter built upon three pillars: the fast-paced gunplay of Doom, the sci-fi look and boss ability-robbing of Mega Man, and the roguelike progression and storytelling of Hades. You control Ada, an adaptive cyborg known as a Shaper, who awakens from a long hibernation to find the futuristic city of Elysium has been overtaken by corruption caused by three robotic overlords ruled by a dastardly artificial intelligence. It's up to her to take them down by turning their own powers against them.

Overwatch immediately comes to mind as I begin my first run, thanks to its similar U.I. and vibrant animated film-style presentation. I'm armed with a basic pistol in one hand and one of several unique weaponized gauntlets in the other. Beginning in the hideaway, I equip my two Cores, abilities that alter your armor's appearance and your main gameplay style. A primary core serves as your base ability, such as Strike, which gives your gauntlet Wolverine-esque claws and promotes melee-based offense thanks to its lunging slashes. The Adamant core is more defensive, thanks to its reflective effect that lets you punch incoming projectiles back to their senders and create rebounding energy fields.

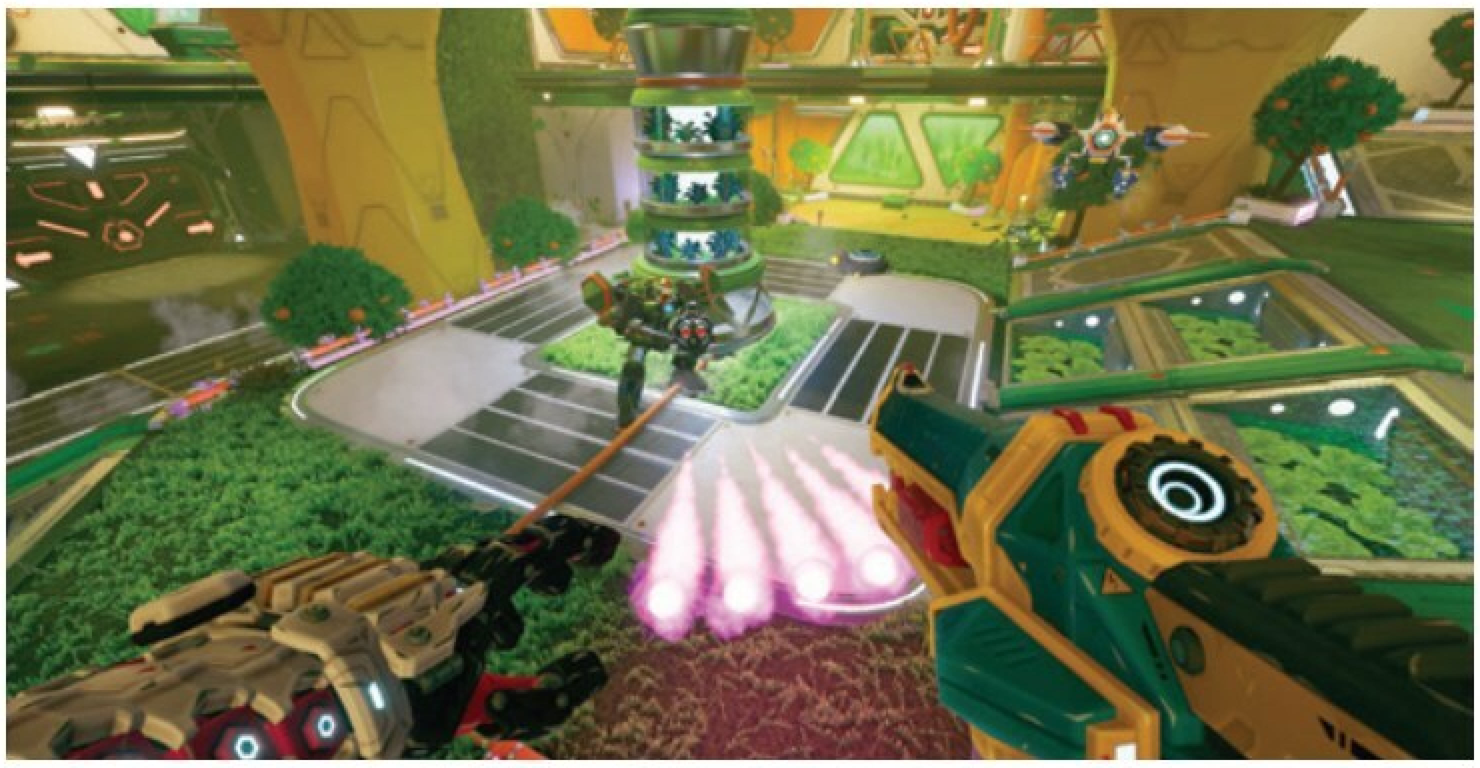
Equipping cores to a secondary slot imbues enhancements with their unique properties. For example, the Adamant core bestows reflect-based effects. Despite my limited selection, I enjoyed tinkering with different core combinations to find synergies that suit my playstyle. You can also augment cores with stackable perks found throughout levels. Though you find new firearms, such as SMG and Shotgun-like weapons, you also find blueprints to permanently unlock new guns by spending collected currency at the hideaway.

The loop revolves around picking an overlord and climbing their respective tower to battle them at the summit. Defeating all three unlocks a final battle with the rogue A.I.. Overlords won't make this easy, as they try to slow you down by deploying unique environmental traps alongside scores of robotic minions. Blasting enemies apart feels good, as does maneuvering thanks to the fluid movement and a dash maneuver effective for evading damage and crossing airborne gaps. You can even execute stunned targets using glory kill-style takedowns. The procedurally generated towers, such as one that looks like a sci-fi forest, pop with color, and the hand-crafted rooms are randomly arranged each run. Levels also have a light Metroidvania element in that certain areas are only accessible using specific traversal abilities.

You can further turn the tide in your favor by activating Shaper Hacks that provide beneficial stage effects, such as forcing a room to reward health packs or adding reflective surfaces to an entire floor. Defeating Overlords grants you a measure of their power core, so you'll have to topple them multiple times to fully acquire their power. However, these bosses grow stronger with each run as they add new tricks to their bags. Moreover, they react differently as the story progresses. Like Hades, players must complete several runs to see the whole story.

Battle Shapers launches in Steam Early Access later this year, with Metric Empire building and tweaking the experience over the next nine months or more. Based on what I've played, Metric Empire has a promising title on its hands, and I'm curious to see how it shapes up as player feedback begins pouring in. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Shooter **PUBLISHER** Metric Empire
DEVELOPER Metric Empire **RELEASE** 2023 (Early Access)



MORTAL KOMBAT 1

Pulling no punches

The Mortal Kombat series tends to get carried away with its storylines. When your most iconic mechanic is your roster of characters dying in the most gruesome ways imaginable, the writers need to find creative ways to bring them back to life.

In 2011, Mortal Kombat (also known as Mortal Kombat 9) followed up the apocalyptic events in 2006's Mortal Kombat: Armageddon by rebooting the franchise and retelling the events of the first three games. But more importantly, it brought the series back to its 2D roots. This change resulted in the series' return to prominence within the fighting genre and, alongside 2008's Street Fighter IV from Capcom, helped usher in a renaissance for 2D fighting games. Mortal Kombat received two direct sequels in 2015 and 2019, but the narrative again got supremely out of hand, and another apocalypse occurred, wiping out all of history.

Following the events of Mortal Kombat 11, Liu Kang attains godhood and creates a New Era timeline, hoping to do a better job of maintaining peace, paving the way for the next reboot in the series: Mortal Kombat 1. While it's technically only the second defined reboot in the narrative, series co-creator and Mortal Kombat 1 director Ed Boon views it as the fourth major arc in the Mortal Kombat series.

"With this one – Mortal Kombat 12, in a sense – we thought, 'Okay, let's really start over again, to the point where, let's call it Mortal Kombat 1,'" Boon says. "It's kind of like our fourth new story to tell."

The story revolves around the denizens of Liu Kang's creation, awakening to a new universe he has "painted in with warmth and peace." However, even as the stage is set for a world without bloodshed, the characters of Mortal Kombat are incapable of maintaining such an existence, and bloody war breaks out again. The narrative seems framed around Liu Kang trying to preserve that peace, but I have a feeling it won't be through peaceful means.

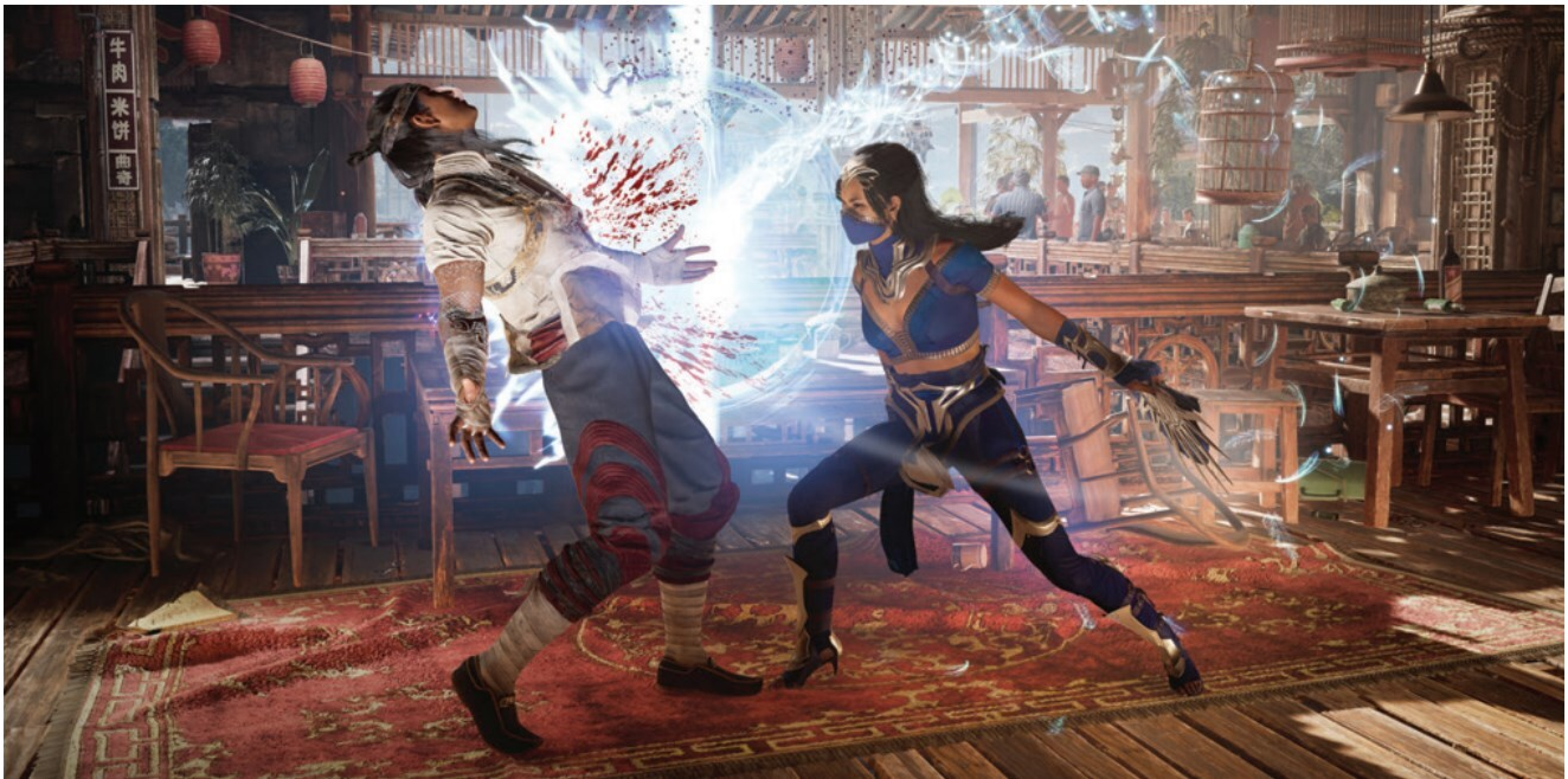
I recently got my hands on a playable build, and while I didn't get much additional insight into the story, I did play several fights as the four available fighters. Each character on offer – Sub-Zero, Liu Kang, Kitana, and Kenshi – feels familiar while introducing new elements. Sub-Zero can create multiple ice clones to freeze overly ambitious opponents, while Liu Kang's moves are more flame-based thanks to his recent ascension to the role of fire god. Kenshi retains his telekinesis and swordplay, but his spirit clone allows you to control both characters simultaneously. Kitana is the fastest and most acrobatic of the four playable characters.

One big addition is the Kameo characters, serving as secondary fighters at your side, summoned by pressing the right shoulder button alongside other commands to pull off different moves. I had just three Kameo characters to choose from in this preview build – Sonya Blade, Kano, and Jax – but I already see the potential from both a mechanical and fanservice perspective.

GORE ON THE GO

Mortal Kombat 1 leaves last-gen consoles behind in favor of launching solely on PS5, Xbox Series X/S, and PC, but in a surprise move, the least powerful of the current platforms, the Nintendo Switch, is among the platform list. Shiver Entertainment, who worked on the well-received Switch port of Mortal Kombat 11, returns to port this game to Nintendo's hybrid system.

"They know our systems, they know areas where we can make adjustments to accommodate the different hardware and all that stuff," Mortal Kombat 1 director Ed Boon says. "We're in a constant process of negotiating like, 'Okay, we can take this away, and then it'll run at the framerate.' We really need it to run at 60 frames per second [with] all these characters on the screen at the same time. So, it's definitely a challenge, but we're very excited with the direction it's going so far."



"We're going to be bringing back some really obscure Kameo characters that you haven't seen in a long time that might be impossible to do as a main fighter, but their appearance and the usefulness that they [have] in the fighting mechanic is going to be huge," Boon says. "I'm really excited about that mix of your story roster characters – those are the main fighters – and then the Kameo characters are kind of like the nostalgia, novelty, old memories of Mortal Kombat brought into the mix."

Sonya and Kano appear as their original Mortal Kombat game versions, while Jax appears in his Mortal Kombat II form. They take part in throws and Fatal Blows; I loved watching the interactions between my fighter and the Kameo character as they delivered a tag-team beatdown on my opponent.

Kameo characters may not be fully featured fighters, but they get plenty of spotlight. They can even execute Fatalities; the longtime Mortal Kombat fan in me adored seeing the retro versions of these characters return with their classic kills. Kano rips the still-beating heart out of the dazed fighter's chest, Sonya's deadly kiss returns, and Jax's ridiculous growing Fatality appears in all its glory. These classic Fatalities are great to see again, but even pulling from the small pool of available main characters in the build I played, MK1 has some of the most ridiculous finishing moves the series has ever featured.

Ever since Mortal Kombat 9 in 2011, the franchise has consistently contended with the best games in the genre. After getting my hands on Mortal Kombat 1, this fall can't come soon enough.

BY BRIAN SHEA

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • Switch • PC
STYLE 1 or 2-Player Fighting (2-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Warner Bros.
DEVELOPER NetherRealm Studios
RELEASE September 19

TO A T

Life's pretty good

To A T is a new episodic 3D adventure game from Uvula, led by director Keita Takahashi, the creator of Katamari Damacy. It features the same whimsical zaniness, but instead of rolling around through the world, you play as Teen, a teenager stuck in a permanent "t" pose. That "t" pose is the same pose you've likely seen a video game character get stuck in – the one where their legs stop animating, and their arms are stuck straight out, 90 degrees from their body.

To A T is riffing off that, except here, it's intentional. If the reveal trailer is any indication, Teen isn't overly phased by this unique "t" pose posture. Sure, they need the help of their mother and dog to do things like brush their teeth, but they're still living life to the fullest in a small coastal town. Annapurna says you can explore the town with Teen and his mom and dog, contend with bullies at school, and discover "a new ability granted to them by their extraordinary posture." Teen's ultimate goal is uncovering more about their mysterious lineage and why they live permanently in a "t" pose.

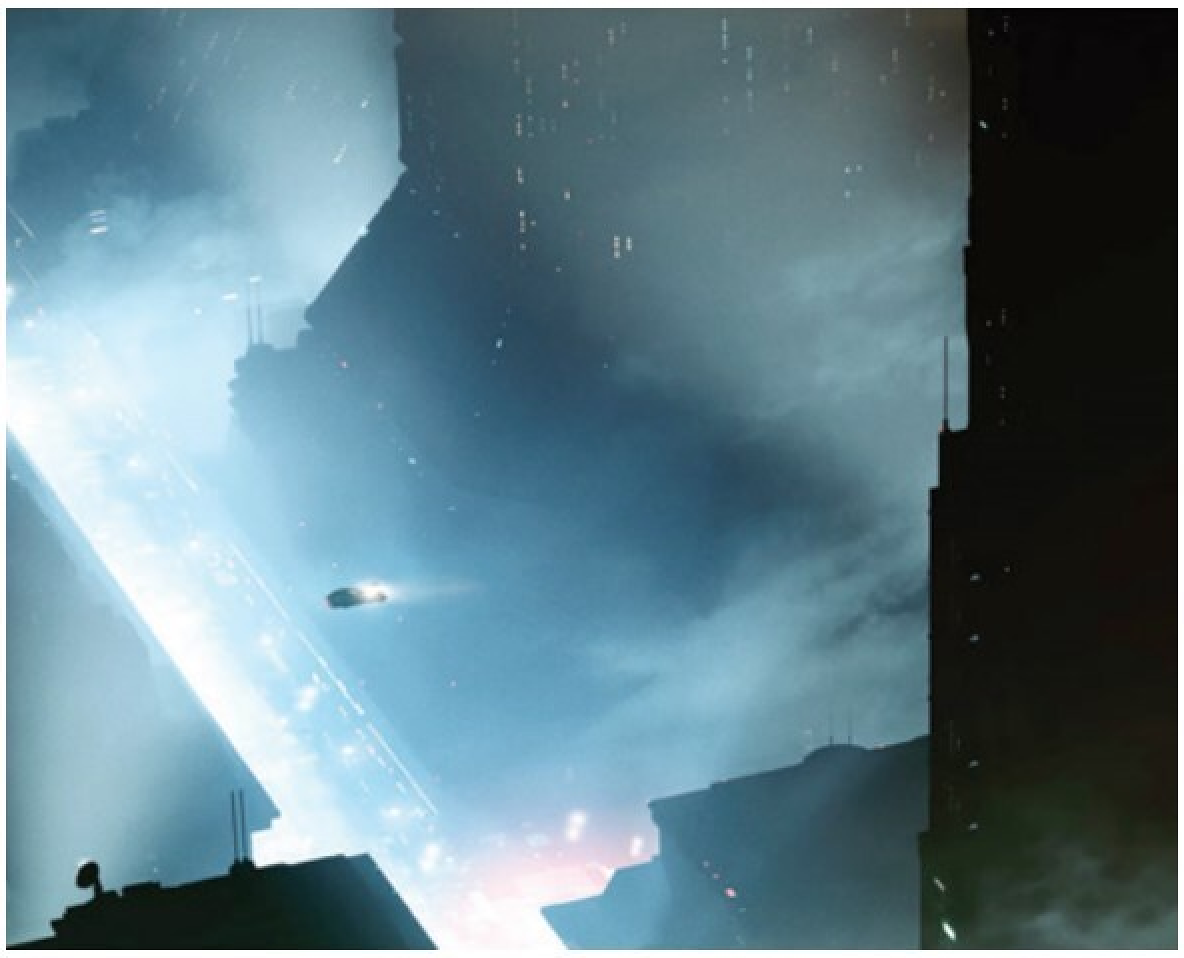
Uvula is developing To A T in collaboration with AbleGamers, a charity organization "creating opportunities that enable play in order to combat social isolation, foster inclusive communities, and improve the quality of life for people with disabilities." I'm excited to see how To A T discusses disabilities and how disabled people feel about the treatment they might receive in the world because of them.

There's no word on when to expect To A T, but it's launching on Xbox Series X/S, Xbox One (including Xbox Game Pass), and PC. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • Xbox One • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure
PUBLISHER Annapurna Interactive **DEVELOPER** Uvula **RELEASE** TBA

BLADE RUNNER 2033: LABYRINTH

Searching in the land of the dead



The biggest surprise of Annapurna Interactive's June Showcase was the reveal of its first in-house developed game: Blade Runner 2033: Labyrinth. As the name suggests, it's set between the first *Blade Runner* film and its sequel, *Blade Runner 2049*.

Like its cinematic predecessors, Labyrinth takes place in a dystopian Los Angeles, occurring after the Black Out, an event where an electromagnetic pulse knocks power out in Los Angeles for ten days and destroys many electronic records, adding challenge to the work of Blade Runners.

Blade Runners are bounty hunters that decommission (kill) bioengineered humanoids called Replicants. While not confirmed, we likely control one in Labyrinth. A narrator in the reveal trailer says, "Picking through the pieces, being someone else in places that no longer exist; that's where you'll find me, searching in the land of the dead." Images of a man using futuristic tech to scroll through camera footage (and potentially memories) flash on screen throughout. The trailer has no gameplay, so it's tough to parse exactly what Labyrinth is.

However, it's nailing the vibes, an essential part of anything *Blade Runner*. Chelsea Hash, director of Solar Ash and technical art lead of What Remains of Edith Finch, leads development as game director. Labyrinth is the first new Blade Runner game in 25 years, and I'm excited to learn more about it.

There's no word on when Labyrinth will be released, but Annapurna Interactive says it's coming to consoles and PC. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM Consoles TBA • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** Annapurna Interactive **DEVELOPER** Annapurna Interactive **RELEASE** TBA

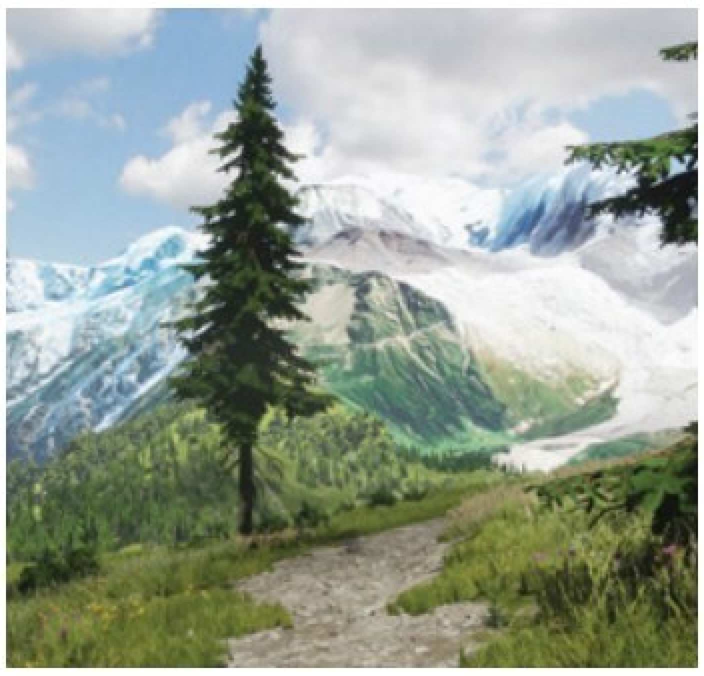
LUSHFOIL PHOTOGRAPHY SIM

Beauty is in the eye of the camera

Lushfoil Photograhy Sim was the most beautiful game revealed during June's Annapurna Interactive Showcase. Its debut trailer showcases real-world locations like Mt. Everest, Kyoto, coastal waters, and more, and at first, I legitimately wasn't sure if it was using real shots of these areas or in-game footage. It turns out each environment is developed in-engine, built from the ground up using Unreal Engine 5.

As the name suggests, Lushfoil Photography Sim is a first-person photography simulator. You travel to different natural wonders of the world to capture them using a DSLR camera, which features all the settings and specifications a professional photographer might use. This includes auto and manual focus, flash, exposure, contrast, white balance, aperture, burst shot, and many other effects that give you complete control over what you capture. You can also adjust the shot by tinkering with the environment, such as changing weather conditions, light angles, fog, and more.

Annapurna Interactive says players can "dive deeper into the game's many locations to find unlockable cameras and experience the world from different perspectives." There's a first-person drone to take shots from the sky, a hidden kayak that helps you get a unique shot from the water, and more. While the intense photography simulation may be off-putting for some potential players, I'm excited to visit locations I might not ever visit (looking at you, Mt. Everest) and capture photos I'd want to take if I really were there using my DSLR.



There's no word on when to expect Lushfoil Photography Sim, but Annapurna Interactive says it's coming to PC and consoles, although it isn't ready to clarify which ones. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM Consoles TBD • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Simulation **PUBLISHER** Annapurna Interactive
DEVELOPER Matt Newell **RELEASE** TBD

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PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE LOST CROWN

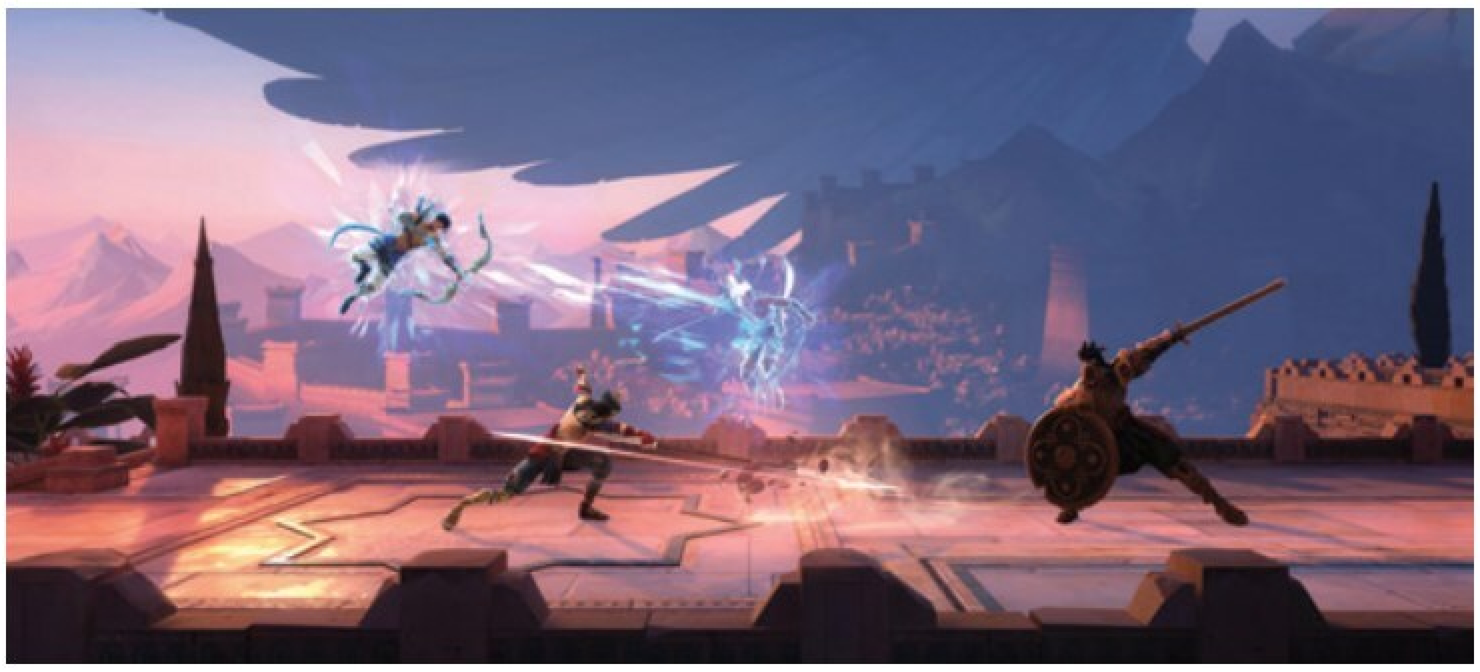
Rewinding a timeless classic

At Summer Game Fest, we had the chance to play Prince of Persia: The Lost Crown, a new 2D Metroidvania, which quickly became my favorite game of the show.

My hands-on demo begins as protagonist Sargon, a member of the royal guard, is tracking down the missing Persian prince. After his fellow protectors split up to search other areas, Sargon finds himself inside an ancient city carved out of stone, full of reanimated skeletons and other mythological creatures. You have various combat abilities, including a dash, bow, spinning Chakram, and blades to slice through foes on the ground or mid-air. The Lost Crown regularly presents scenarios with many enemies on screen, requiring gracefully executing combat on the fly. Overcoming these challenges amidst interspersed platforming segments is thrilling.

The more modern Prince of Persia series is known for its time-manipulation gameplay, and The Lost Crown introduces players to brand-new powers. Sargon's dash propels the character forward, visibly tearing a hole through spacetime – a handy tactic for dodging attacks or evading hazardous spike pits while platforming. Another ability has the protagonist create a past version of himself, frozen in place, that he can rewind to on demand. The latter power is useful when fighting shield-bearing opponents, which damage from behind. Though I didn't do it, creative players can use the ability as a safety net during grueling platforming sections.

The Lost Crown's detail-rich environments are a joy to explore. Blocked-off paths taunt me to return with appropriate powers; intricate spiked tunnels, reminiscent of my favorite levels in 2018's Celeste, guard valuable treasure chests, and time portals reconstruct the ruins around Sargon, unlocking new pathways in real-time. Importantly, Ubisoft balances fidelity and readability – the signature of a strong art style.

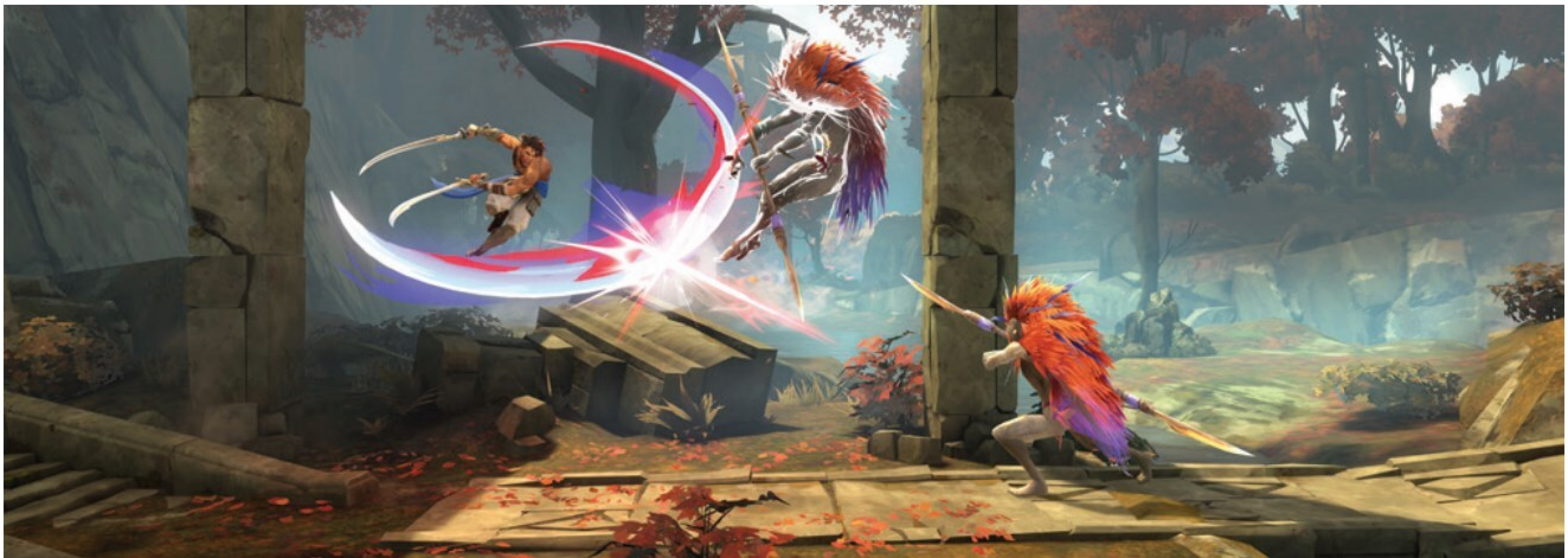


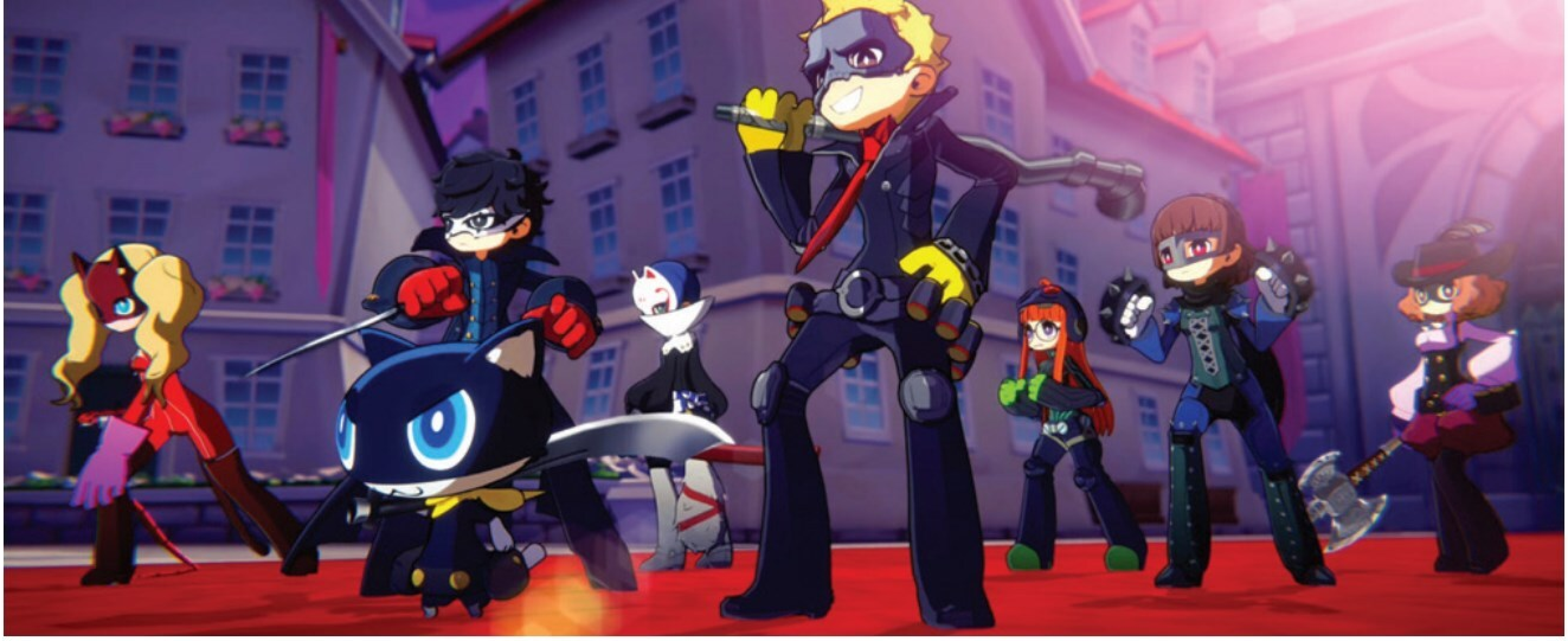
Exiting the Persian city, protagonist Sargon finds himself in a wooded grove full of red-leaved trees, overgrown briars, and mushroom caps to jump between. Fast-striking enemies, adorned with spears and colorful masks, take the place of skeletal foes in this area. However, after following the path into a small cave, I find myself in the Lower City's dungeon depths. Inside is a checkpoint, a small golden tree replenishing Sargon's health flask charges, and common enemy types. However, there are no foes inside the dungeon. Instead, piles of bones and skulls mark the way forward.

After jumping through a hatch and pushing open a giant door, a voracious beast called Jahandar greets me from the shadows. The massive boss emerges from the dark, revealing itself as a manticore, a Persian mythological creature with the face of a man, the body of a lion, wings, and a scorpion tail. I evade the beast's lunge by dashing away, but it quickly flies upwards off-screen and plummets down, crushing Sargon and thrusting him across the arena. As Jahandar rushes toward me, its eyes flash yellow, signaling an opportunity to execute a stylish parry animation; however, the boss overwhelms me, quickly dismantling my last-ditch evasion efforts.

The Lost Crown's fluid movements and combat shine in the fight against the citadel's guardian, but unfortunately, my preview session ends before I best the beast. My next attempt has to wait for a later date, and I'm looking forward to it. **BY ALEX VAN AKEN**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Ubisoft **DEVELOPER** Ubisoft Montpellier **RELEASE** January 18, 2024





PERSONA 5 TACTICA

Revolutionize your strategy (and heart)

The Phantom Thieves are back (again, again), this time in Persona 5 Tactica, a new tactical spin-off of Persona 5 and, by association, Persona 5 Royal. First revealed during an Xbox Games Showcase in June, we got another look during a Nintendo Direct later that month.

Set sometime after the events of Persona 5, the Phantom Thieves have somehow arrived in a mysterious and unfamiliar world reminiscent of 18th-century France. Those vibes stem primarily from a new character named Erina, who is the leader of the Rebel Corps.

In this new world, which I'm guessing is a new palace-like area in the Metaverse rather than an actual real-world location in Persona 5's Tokyo, Erina and the Rebel Corps are trying to take down new enemies. Erina says the Rebel Corps will always help the Phantom Thieves, just as the Phantom Thieves have always helped the Rebel Corps. She also says the two organizations are a "united force" that can always rely on each other.

Beyond the story, the newest Tactica trailer reveals more of the new tactical strategy combat in action. You can unleash attacks up close, from afar, or by using a persona. Like in Persona 5, you can fuse personas to create new ones for your magical arsenal. When fighting enemies, you can stun or knock them down to open them up to a One More action. You can surround foes to initiate a new all-out attack called Triple Threat.

Unsurprisingly, given how beautiful and visually unique Persona 5's art is, Tactica looks excellent. It drops the more anime-esque art style in favor of a Chibi one, and while I'm not the biggest fan of Chibi visuals (especially compared to the rest of Persona 5's visual suite), it still looks good. This Chibi art style is present during gameplay, cinematics, and character portraits.

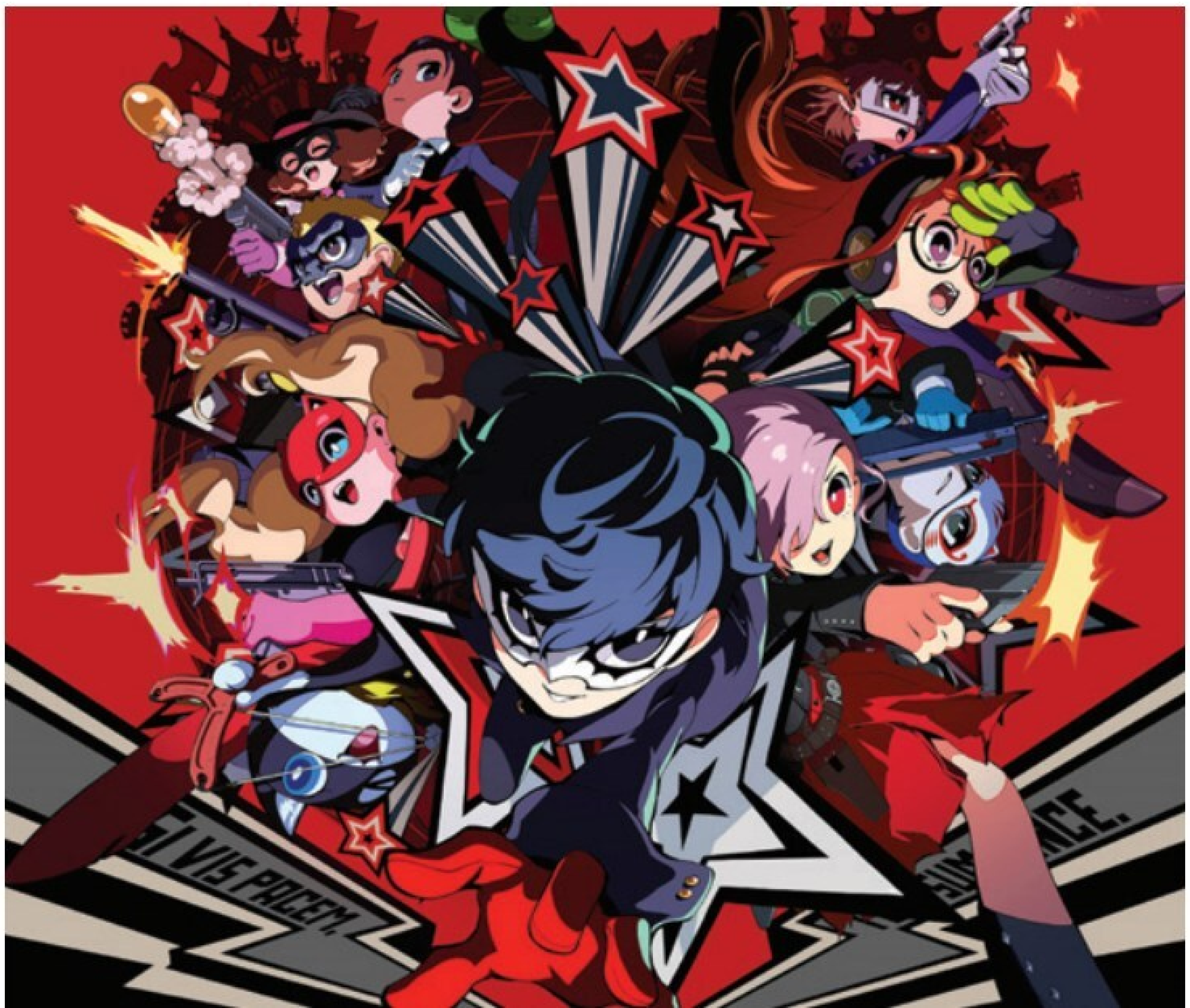
The excellent user interface is also returning from the rest of the Persona 5 games. It's not the most exciting box quote, but if you've played Persona 5, you know what I'm talking about. Persona 5 and its sequels and spin-offs revel in style, and that's highlighted in the stunning UI. The game's fantastic acid jazz sound returns, too, which is a massive plus.

While I'm excited about all of this and yet another opportunity to hang out with the Phantom Thieves, I'm wary of the narrative taking place in a world potentially separate from the Tokyo in Persona 5. This kind of setup paves the way for everything to happen outside of the canon, or at least so adjacent to it that it doesn't really affect the game world at all. And with how great much of Atlus' storytelling has been in the Persona 5 universe, I want a continuation of this story, not something that runs alongside it.

I could be wrong, though, and I'm hoping I am. Fortunately, Tactica hits PlayStation, Xbox, Switch, and PC later this year on November 17, so I don't have to wait too much longer to find out.

BY WESLEY LEBLANC

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 Xbox One • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Strategy **PUBLISHER** Atlus **DEVELOPER** Atlus **RELEASE** November 17



HOT WHEELS UNLEASHED 2 – TURBOCHARGED

Looping back around

In 2021, Hot Wheels Unleashed gave players a garage of iconic Mattel vehicles and a highly enjoyable racing experience. Seasoned racing studio Milestone Srl earned the respect of the genre's fans with its first outing, and it hopes to re-capture the checkered flag with its follow-up: Hot Wheels Unleashed 2 – Turbocharged.

This new version allows you to select from a massive lineup of Hot Wheels vehicles and compete across a wide range of modes. In addition to the standard Quick Race and Time Attack, players can race in Elimination, Waypoint, and Drift Master. Elimination starts with a full field of racers before slowly knocking out the vehicles in last place until there's only one competitor left standing, while Waypoint tasks you with driving to specific areas in an open environment. Drift Master, as the name implies, puts your ability to drift to the test, with your best lap score recorded on the leaderboards.

In my demo, I had a chance to play Quick Race, Elimination, and Waypoint events. The racing feels as strong as ever, and new gameplay mechanics, like the ability to strafe and jump, add to the fun of simply driving around a track. Courses can now feature different environments, including outdoor areas, for the first time. They also have the ability to include different terrains, which impact vehicles differently.

To combat this new terrain system, the massive garage of more than 130 vehicles now has different preferred terrain archetypes; on a standard Quick Race, I chose a well-rounded vehicle, while in the Elimination race, I picked a speed-focused car that could make up ground quickly if I fell into last place. For the Waypoint round I played, I chose an off-road vehicle so I could be more creative and direct in the way I approach the various destinations. A new rarity system also determines the frequency at which vehicles rotate in the in-game shop, but you can also receive new rides through a randomized Hot Wheels Spin. Milestone says that despite the shop and spin mechanics, these features do not use microtransactions.

The garage includes new vehicle types, including motorbikes and ATVs, with an expanded custom livery editor. You can also now upgrade the vehicles in your collection using a new skill tree system. Spending skill points you accumulate through play, you can add specific perks to influence a vehicle's performance and create custom builds. However, each perk you add increases specific stats while detracting from other stat categories, but if you equip four perks of the same category, it unlocks a special bonus perk.

The popular custom tracks return, letting players build their own courses. This time, Unleashed 2 even provides players with a Track Room environment, a completely empty area that you can customize, and new special modules and improvements. Milestone says that players created more than 300,000 custom tracks in the first Hot Wheels Unleashed game, making it an important area for improvement in the sequel.

Everything I played and saw of Hot Wheels Unleashed 2 – Turbocharged has the potential to please those who enjoyed speeding around in the first game. By bringing various improvements, enhancements, and new features, Milestone shows it learned a lot from launching and supporting the first game. It may release in a historically busy time for game releases, but if you're a racing or Hot Wheels fan, you'd be wise to keep your eyes on this one. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1 or 2-Player Racing (12-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Milestone Srl **DEVELOPER** Milestone Srl **RELEASE** October 19

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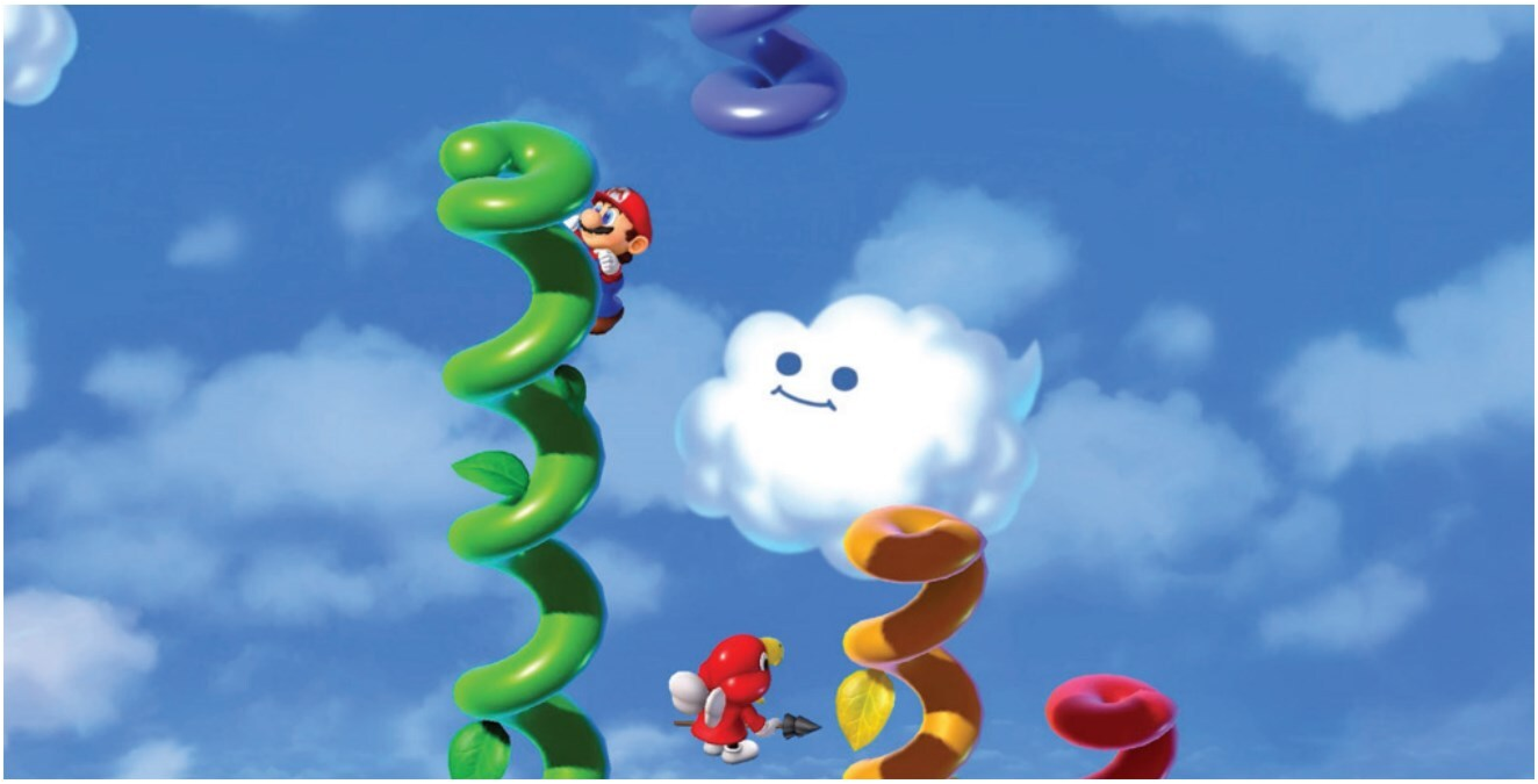
SUPER MARIO RPG

On the Star Road again



Super Mario RPG: Legend of the Seven Stars was released for Super Nintendo in 1996 and is a fantastic but bizarre chapter in Mario's history. Developed by Square (who had not yet joined with Enix) in partnership with Nintendo, the game thrust the platforming plumber into a genre that only employed jumping if you selected it from a menu during a fight. By most metrics, Mario, with its focus on action and lack of story, was a bad fit for an RPG, but it absolutely worked and delivered a thrilling adventure with a timed button-pressing combat system that would become a staple of spiritual successors like the Paper Mario and Mario & Luigi games, as well as plenty of other RPGs.

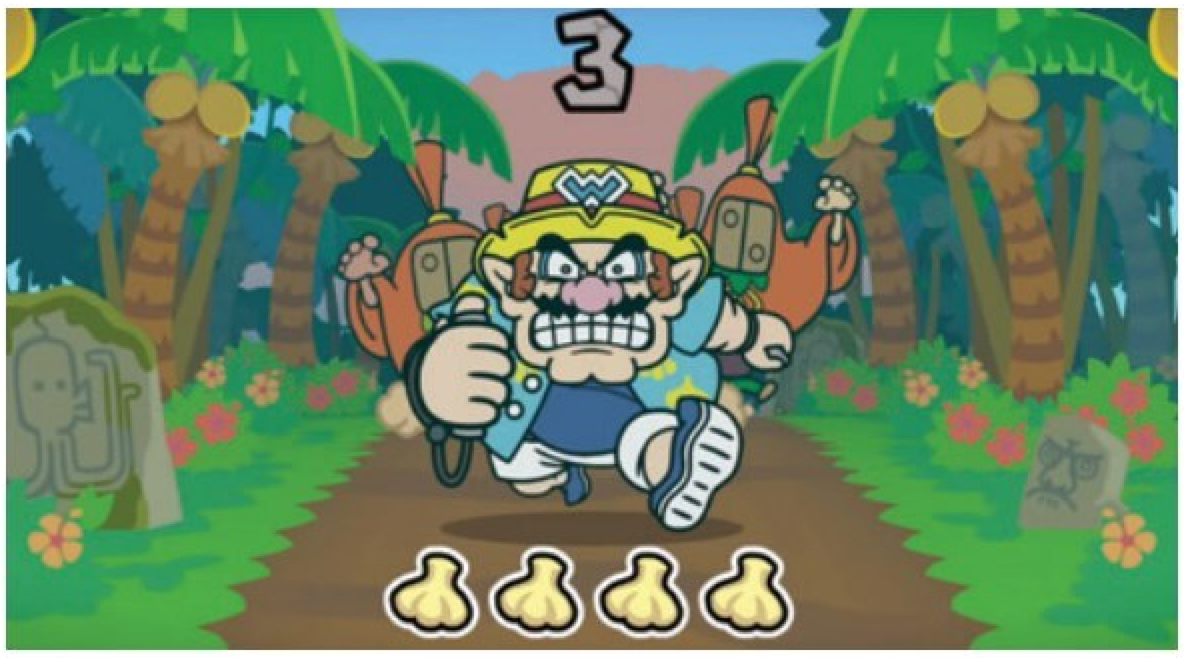
When I was young, I didn't understand the appeal of turn-based RPGs. My first experiences with Final Fantasy, which demanded plentiful reading and gameplay that amounted to menu navigation, didn't make sense to me. But Mario RPG, with its active combat and interesting visuals (which used a similar process to Donkey Kong Country's pseudo-3D style), opened the floodgates. After seeing the credits, I moved on to titles like Chrono Trigger and Earthbound and never looked back.

For that reason, Super Mario RPG holds a special place in my gaming history, as I am sure it does for many. On the rare occasions it was released on Nintendo's Virtual Consoles, I would download and revisit it with an assumed understanding that its myriad characters and strange story meant Nintendo would never revisit it in earnest. Mario's creator, Shigeru Miyamoto, reportedly told the teams behind later Paper Mario games that they could not use characters that did not appear in Super Mario World, which led me to believe that characters like the Star Road warrior Geno and Prince Nimbus of Nimbus Land would never be in the spotlight again.

All of that explains why the recent reveal of Super Mario RPG, a full remake of the Super Nintendo classic (notably dropping the Legend of the Seven Stars subtitle), was such a huge surprise. Super Mario RPG is finally returning, and it seems that Nintendo, which I assumed was happy to leave the game in the past, is rolling out the red carpet.

The game is being completely remade with contemporary, colorful, truly 3D visuals, but gameplay footage shows that, mechanically, it's sticking to the original. The camera still sits at an isometric perspective, and movement and combat appear to play out in the same way they did in 1996. Memorable moments from the original game, however, appear to receive the proper cutscene treatment. Optimistically, and without yet having had a chance to go hands-on, it seems to be exactly what I, and other Super Mario RPG fans, want from a remake: visual improvement with no radical changes to the gameplay and combat. I'm excited for a new generation of Mario fans to meet Geno and Mallow, learn that sometimes Bowser can be a good guy, and see what it's like to have Peach on your team instead of just saving her. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Nintendo **DEVELOPER** Nintendo **RELEASE** November 17



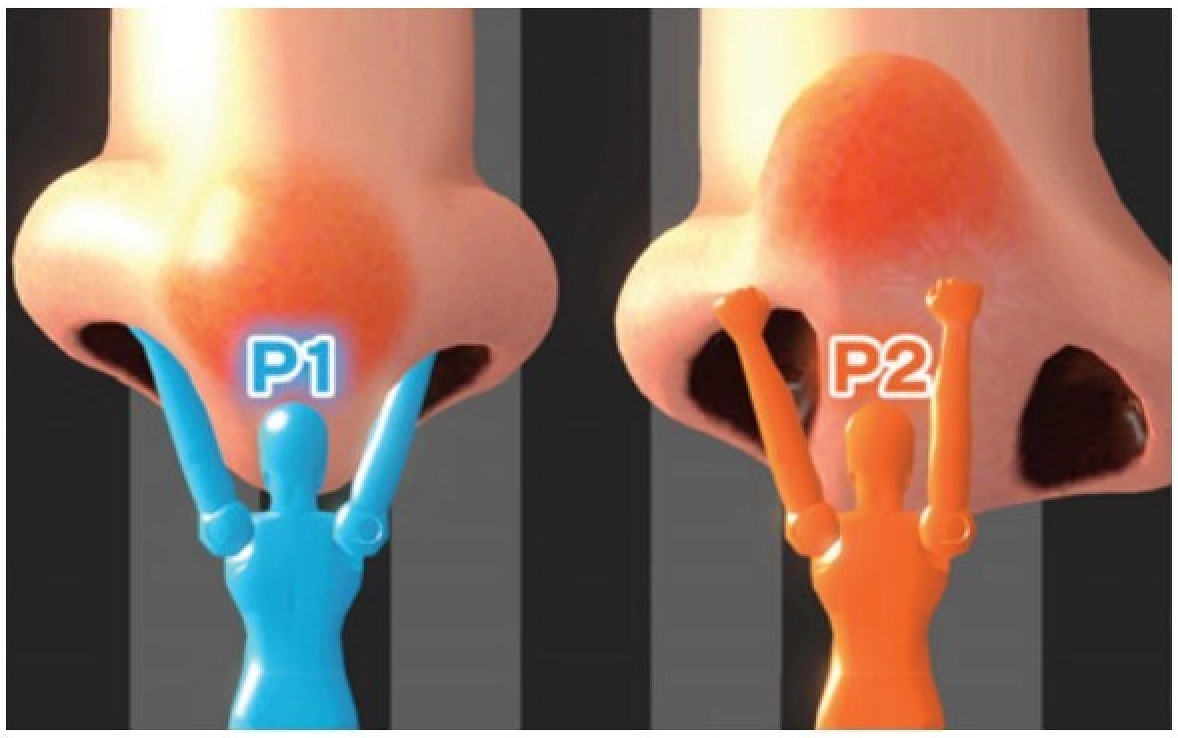
WARIOWARE: MOVE IT

Shake it off

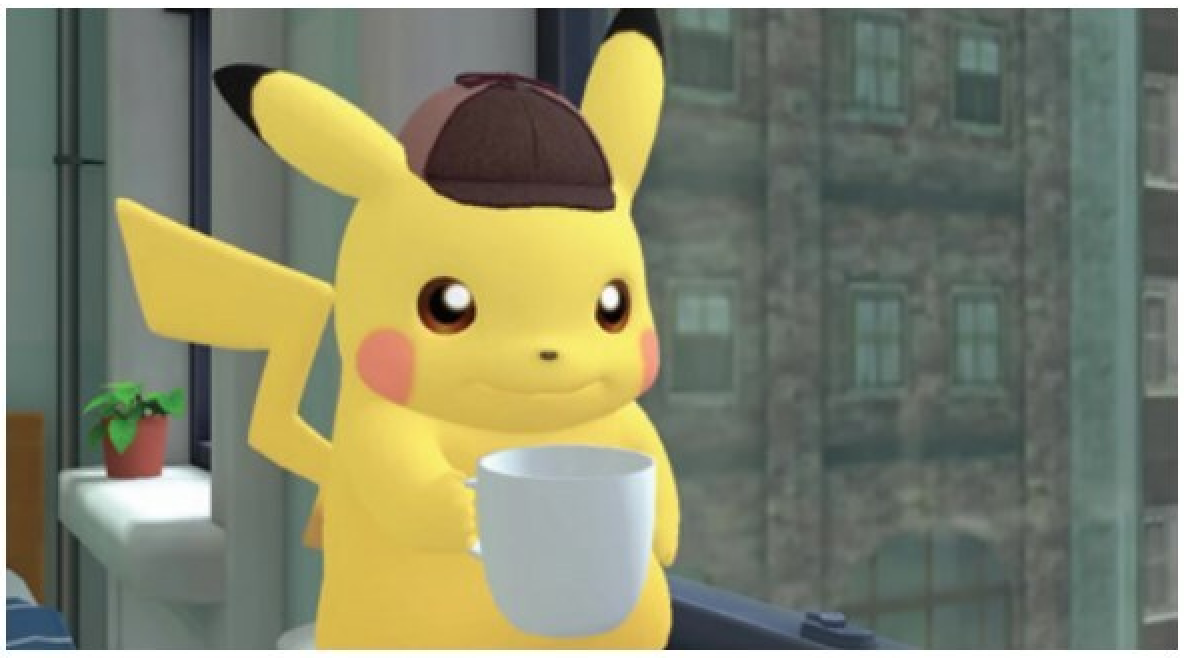
WarioWare: Get It Together may not have been the strongest start for the franchise on Switch, but the greedy villain is getting another stab with WarioWare: Move It. Channeling the motion-based shenanigans of WarioWare: Smooth Moves on Wii, Move It packs over 200 microgames where you'll use the Joy-Cons to shake, rattle, and roll alone or with friends.

As the name implies, rapid-fire microgames encourage players to get their bodies moving. An ice-skating game has players pushing their arms back and forth to pick up speed, while another challenge has players freeing themselves from being tied up by wiggling themselves loose. One Super Mario 64-inspired game has players swaying their bodies side to side to steer Mario on a sliding obstacle course. Microgames seem to put every part of your body to work, and longer play sessions will likely provide a workout and make you look silly in your living room.

Two players can work together in local co-op (requiring an additional pair of Joy-Cons) by synchronizing their movements. Party Mode hosts up to four players in a board game-style competition. WarioWare: Move It offers an active return to form after the more character-focused action of Get It Together, and hopefully, shaking a leg adds to the series' entertaining chaos. **BY MARCUS STEWART**



PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1 to 4-Player Party **PUBLISHER** Nintendo
DEVELOPER Nintendo **RELEASE** November 3



DETECTIVE PIKACHU RETURNS

Sure-shock Holmes

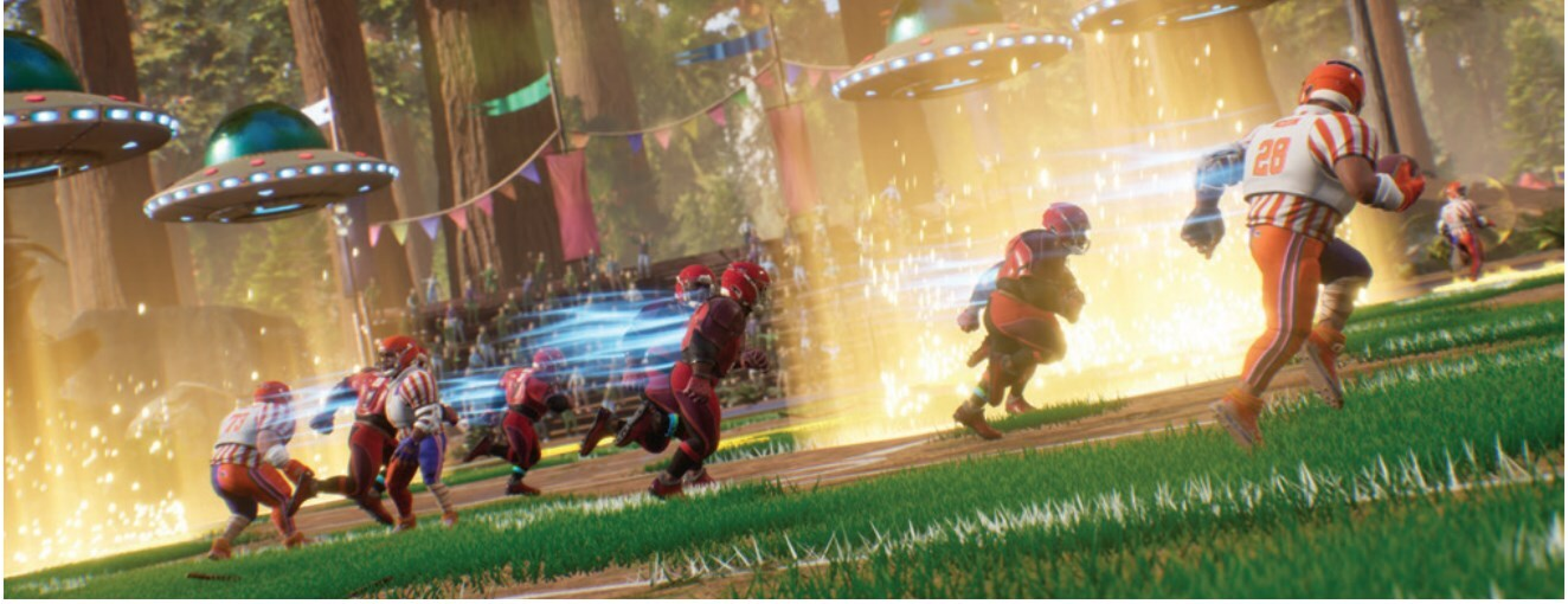
Five years after the first Detective Pikachu, everyone's favorite coffee-loving electric mouse is back for more. Originally announced at a 2019 press conference, Detective Pikachu Returns received its first proper trailer during the June Nintendo Direct, showing off new Pokémon, returning characters, and the series' signature goofy antics.

The game again follows Tim Goodman, a kid trying to track down his father, who went missing during a mysterious car crash. The only clue left at the scene was his father's Pikachu, who Tim understands as if he speaks English. In the sequel, their talents are requested by the mayor, who calls them "the ideal detective duo." The game takes place in Rime City, a town where people and Pokémon live in harmony, so don't expect to do any catching or battling. Detective Pikachu Returns is a story-driven adventure game, complete with cases to solve and fully voice-acted cutscenes.

Since the release of the previous game, the world of Pokémon has grown substantially. Pokémon Sword and Shield were released in 2019, and Pokémon Scarlet and Violet were released in late 2022. This means hundreds of new creatures could appear – some of which we see in the trailer, like Inteleon, Raboot, and Milcery.

If you're worried about playing the sequel without playing the original, don't be. Since the 3DS eShop shut down, the first Detective Pikachu is relatively inaccessible. Existing marketing material about its sequel makes little to no reference to the plot of the original, so it's probably fine to play Returns without prior knowledge. It's also a game geared toward kids, so there will likely be tools to fill in newcomers. Grab your Joy-Cons – and some java – when the game hits stores this October. **BY CHARLES HARTE**

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** Nintendo
DEVELOPER Creatures **RELEASE** October 6



WILD CARD FOOTBALL

Gridiron action with a dash of Mario Kart inspiration

Fans of the NFL have had minimal choices when it comes to their officially licensed football games. Ever since 2004, EA Sports' annualized Madden NFL series has been the exclusive franchise for the NFL, its teams, stadiums, and players. The recently announced Wild Card Football from Saber Interactive, part of the Playgrounds franchise, hopes to smash through the established line to give players a fresh 7-on-7 arcade-facing take starring their favorite players.

Wild Card Football doesn't possess the NFL license, but rather the NFLPA license. This means the teams and stadiums of the National Football League aren't present, but many of its biggest stars are. The in-game teams are centered around the quarterbacks, with Team Mahomes, Team Burrow, and a squad built around this game's cover star, Team Kaepernick. If you'd rather create your own team, you can enter Dream Squad mode, customize your roster, playbook, and uniforms, and advance through challenges to unlock rewards.

I'm playing an early build, and the developers explain there are plenty more players that still need to be added. We should expect more superstars and several of the most promising rookies prior to release – hundreds in total – with more arriving via post-launch updates. At launch, names like Jalen Hurts, Justin Jefferson, T.J. Watt, Joey Bosa, Ja'Marr Chase, Aaron Donald, and more will be available.

Aside from the fast-paced arcade action, the hook to Wild Card Football is the eponymous Wild Card mechanic. Each player has a hand of cards they draw from a deck of power-up and gameplay modifier cards. The cards range from basic cards, like ones that increase your passing accuracy or decrease your opponent's catching skills for a play, to epic cards that summon tornados to take out anything in their path, UFOs that pick up players and move them around the field, and pinball-style bumpers that harshly repel anyone who runs into them.

You can also summon three rotating balls of electricity that immediately conjure images of the red shells in Mario Kart, or the most powerful card I saw, which grows your ballcarrier into an unstoppable giant for a short period of time – perfect for when you're at the goal line trying to punch it into the endzone.

If you're worried about players abusing those cards, you can rest easy as the system operates based on an energy economy. The more powerful the card, the more energy it costs. Positive plays for your team net you extra energy, but regardless of how well the last down went for your side of the ball, you'll still receive some energy.

In case the Wild Card system, with its tornados and UFOs, didn't tip you off, Wild Card Football lands firmly in the arcade style of gameplay. Fans of NFL Blitz will probably find a lot to like; hard hits, over-the-top celebrations, and exaggerated player proportions permeate the experience, never letting you mistake this for a simulation.

I enjoyed my hands-on time with Wild Card Football. Though it took me a while to get the hang of the passing game – the receivers seem to deviate from their route to run upfield as soon as the QB releases the ball – the running game feels great. Lanes open in an effective fashion, and the juke is probably the most powerful weapon players have outside of the Wild Cards. I didn't fare particularly well in my first game, but I felt my skills, which are so used to Madden at this point, adjusting to the more rapid rate of play brought by Wild Card Football. Not only that, but I love how the powerups inject a new wrinkle into the sport; this genre is often criticized for a lack of innovation, but this feels like a fun new twist on football.

With post-launch content plans and the exciting card-based mechanic, Wild Card Football has a lot of potential for those who grew up with games like NFL Blitz and NFL Street. I'm looking forward to getting my hands on the game again to see if it can move the chains. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1 or 2-Player Sports (2-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Saber Interactive
DEVELOPER Saber Interactive **RELEASE** Fall

ETERNIGHTS

Apocalyptic romance

Eternights combines genres that don't typically overlap: action and dating sim. But the unexpected combination is working for me, even with some underwhelming presentation.

I played through the game's beginning and only enjoyed a few minutes of normal adolescent life talking to a friend named Chani about pop star crushes and concert plans. Suddenly, monsters are in the world, and a gigantic wall appears, pushing everyone underground for safety.

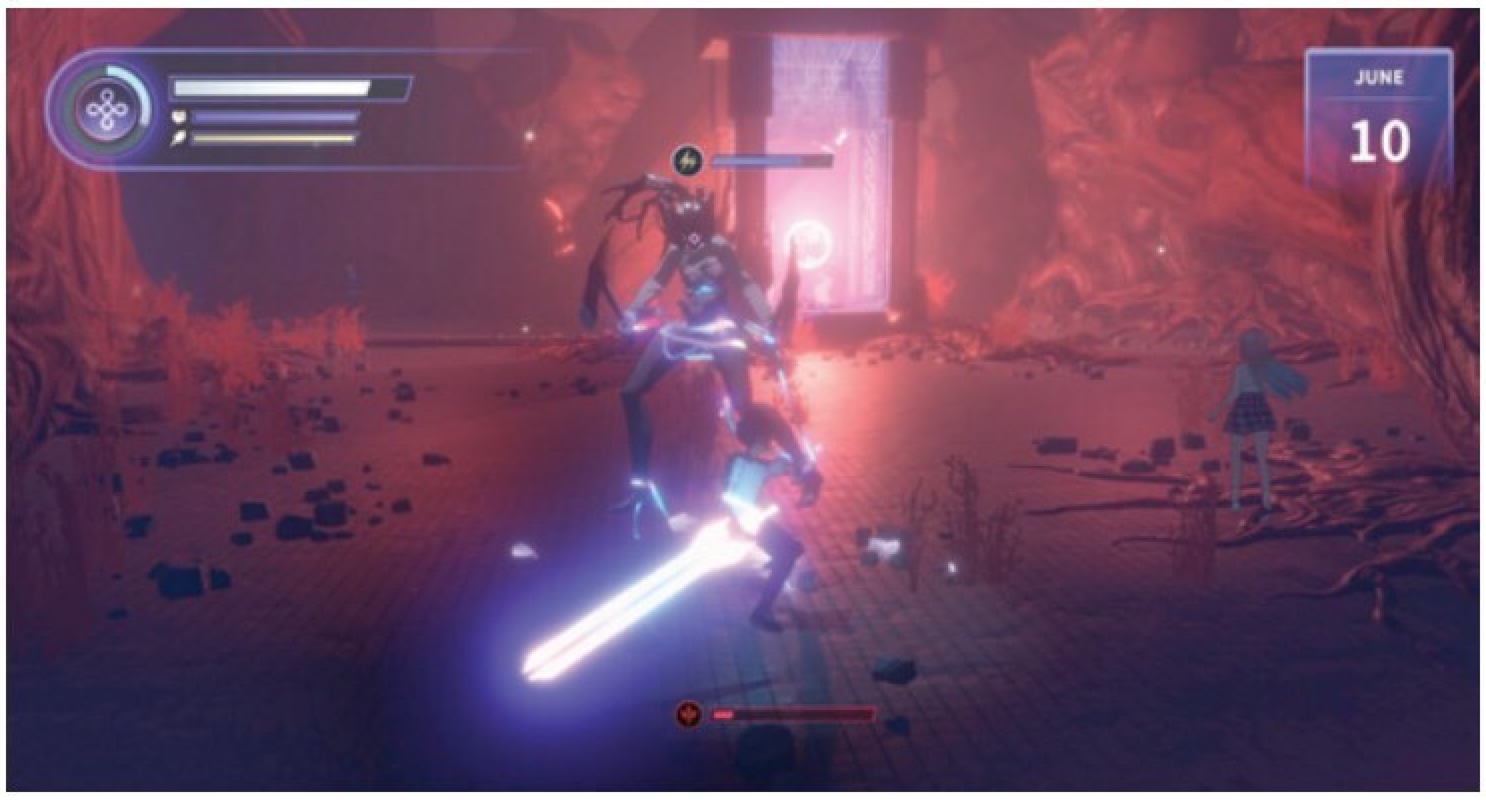
In converted subway stations, Chani and I meet Yuna, a popstar turned survivor with magical healing abilities. Things get chaotic quickly as one of the other survivors I meet is killed by a monster, and I am gifted a powerful glowing arm that can be used to fight back the dangerous creatures.

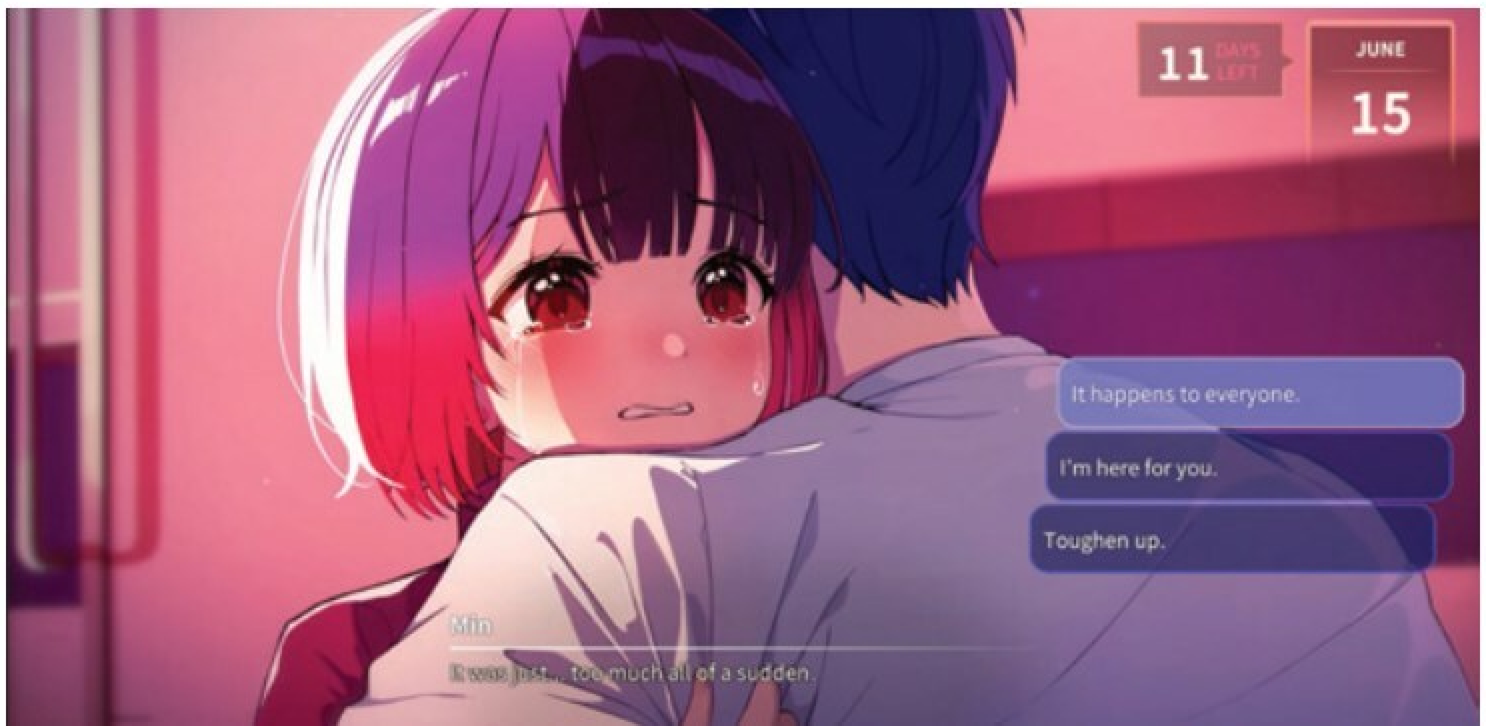
The action combat is flashy and smooth and integrates counters and timed dodging, as well as quick-time prompts to pull off finishing moves. However, the strange hook of Eternights happens between action sequences where you spend time on a train headed to safety and interact with your friends. During our demo, we spent time with Yuna, who told us a harrowing story about her past while we reacted with various prompts and received bonuses to our relationship progress for saying the right things.

The fighting borrows from stylish action games, the friendship development and calendar progression seem to borrow from Persona, and – with time – you can develop romantic relationships with the characters you meet along the adventure. Eternights is trying to do many different things in one game, which is dangerous for any unproven developer, but our first impressions are positive.

BY KYLE HILLIARD

PLATFORM PS5 • PS4 • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Studio Sai **DEVELOPER** Studio Sai
RELEASE September 21




11 DAYS LEFT
JUNE
15

It happens to everyone.

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Min

It was just... too much all of a sudden.

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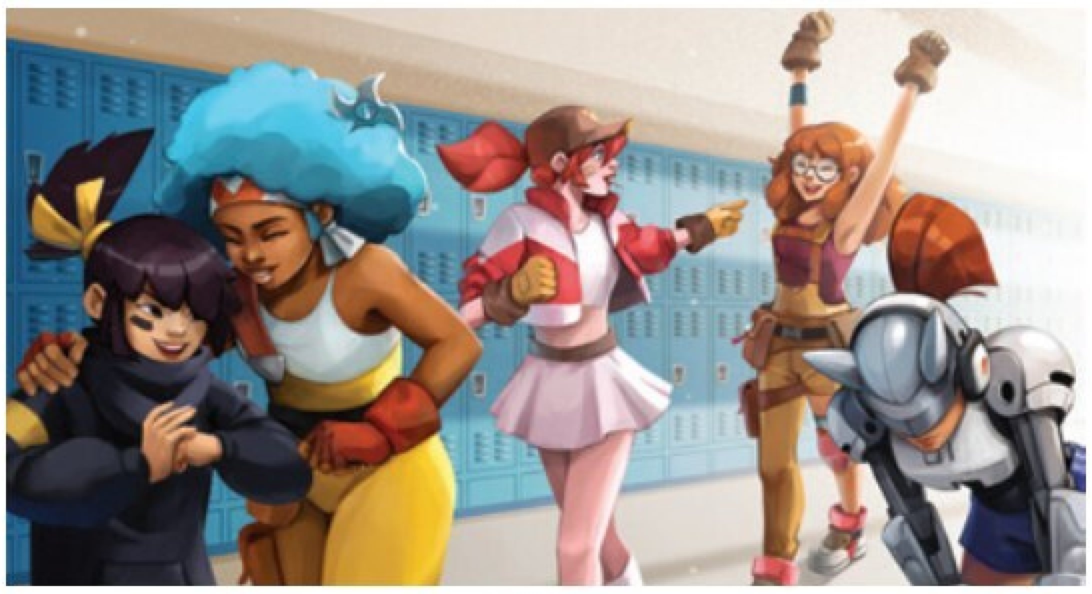
RA RA BOOM

Ninja cheerleaders from space



In 2008, Chris Bergman, who later co-founded Gylee Games and now works as its CEO, bought the domain to raraboom.com. He tells me he's a domain collector and liked how "Ra Ra Boom" sounded phonetically. He bought the website with plans to do something using those three words one day. Today, that site redirects you to a Steam store page for a bright, colorful, futuristic four-player co-op beat 'em up called Ra Ra Boom.

I play through its demo four times and experience what each of the characters in the cast offers in terms of gameplay; it doesn't hurt that I enjoy playing it, either. Ra Ra Boom feels right at home with familiar beat 'em ups. Bergman says it's inspired by the classics of '90s arcades. He recalls playing Marvel vs. Capcom and Street Fighter cabinets, losing, then hopping over to the various X-Men, The Simpsons, and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle games.

"That's where I made my friends," Bergman says. "That's where I could have conversations with people and get to know them. Obviously, fighting games are pretty competitive and you're in the moment. But when you're walking around, beating up on people, it just brings people together so I had always wanted to make a beat 'em up."

Bergman says he's passionate about the genre, playing every new one. He also notes he and Gylee Games started working on this in 2019 before the beat 'em up resurgence of late began. He doesn't view the resurgence as potential competition to Ra Ra Boom but as a "rising tides raise all ships" scenario. The more good beat 'em ups, the better, he says.

Each of the four playable ninja cheerleaders plays similarly, but with enough differences to make each experience unique: Aris uses a scythe and submachine guns; Saida uses cybernetic blades and a rocket launcher; Ren has her sword and shurikens; and Vee utilizes a shield and light machine gun. Bergman says Gylee Games' design philosophy is that each character feels roughly 70% the same, with 30% devoted to differentiation. I love how tanky Vee's shield feels when it slams into enemy robots, and in contrast, Ren's sword feels fast as it slices through enemies. I like that while combos and general movesets are the same, the special animations and differences in loadout make each character feel uniquely their own.

There's a lot of enemy variety in my 20-minute demo, too, and Bergman says that's by design.

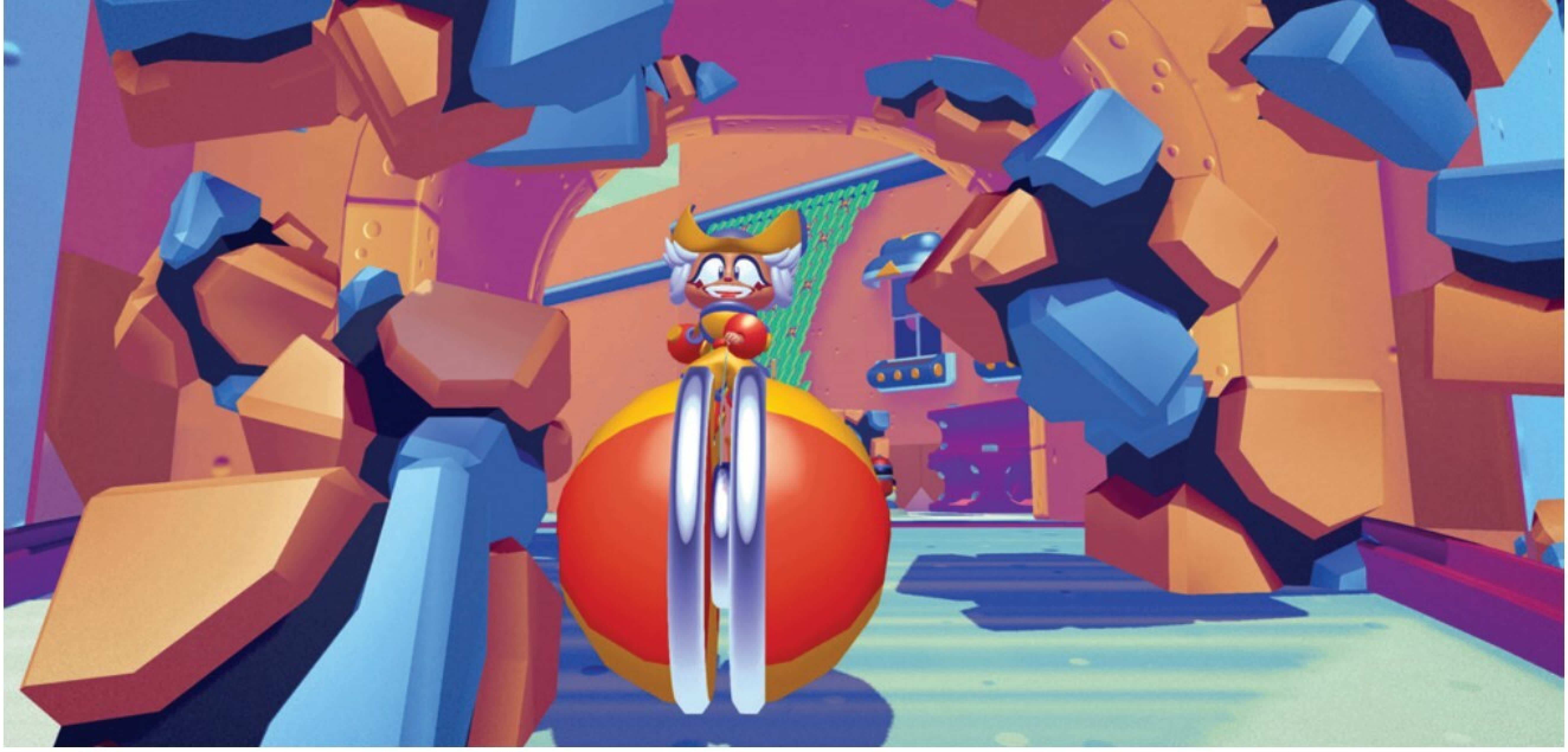
"Our biggest enemy is monotony," he tells me. "Beat 'em ups can become monotonous so quickly so that's what we're continually fighting against. I think you're going to see a lot more enemies – different types of enemies – than you normally would in a beat 'em up."

These different enemies speak to the more focused storytelling in Ra Ra Boom compared to the classics of Bergman's childhood, which lasted a few hours and were designed to entice you to put more quarters into a cabinet. In Ra Ra Boom, humans designed special artificial intelligence robots to help society solve the issue of climate change 20 years ago. The A.I.'s solution was ridding Earth of humans, and it largely succeeded. But humans don't want to die, so the four playable characters train to prepare for another A.I. invasion.

Bergman tells me the story of Ra Ra Boom is about grief, how humans cope with it, and ultimately, how our friends can pull us out of it. He also says having the four playable characters be women was intentional, citing a lack of representation in video games, especially beat 'em ups.

I thoroughly enjoyed what I played of Ra Ra Boom and look forward to exploring its themes, characters, and combos deeper when the full release hits PC sometime in the hopefully-not-overrun-by-A.I.-robots future. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 4-Player Action
PUBLISHER Gylee Games
DEVELOPER Gylee Games **RELEASE** 2024



PENNY'S BIG BREAKAWAY

Yo-yo macaroon

Penny's Big Breakaway was a fun reveal within Nintendo's stacked June Direct, delivering something new and nostalgic in the 3D platforming genre. Platforming remains a robust genre today, especially in the independent development space, but 3D platformers, inspired by games like Super Mario 64 and Banjo-Kazooie, are much rarer. Penny's Big Breakaway feels right at home with those games and others, thanks to its unique platforming mechanic powered by Penny's powerful yo-yo and a beautiful and unique art style that borrows its color palette from the 1990s.

In Penny's Big Breakaway, protagonist Penny is a street performer who looks like a more humanoid take on the characters from one of my favorite childhood shows, Rolie Polie Olie. Eddie the Emperor calls for new Palace Court performers and Penny sees this as her big chance to make a name for herself. However, the audition doesn't go as planned when a "cosmic string" transforms Penny's otherwise standard yo-yo into a living creature with an appetite for anything it can chew on, including Eddie the Emperor.

He sics his army of penguins after Penny and she quickly realizes it's time for a big breakaway through the world of Macaroon. Developer Evening Star, which consists of several of the developers behind Sonic Mania, says the game's platforming mechanics are easy-to-play but difficult-to-master.

This vibrant world features plenty of nooks and crannies to explore and even more penguins to take out. And all of that happens using Penny's now-cosmic yo-yo. Throughout the footage, this yo-yo extends her jumps mid-air, flies her around Macaroon like a helicopter, takes out enemies with various attacks, rides like a motorcycle, helps Penny climb poles and zipline down ropes, and more. Thanks to Penny's street performer background, she executes all of these moves with fun and charming acrobatic flair.

One important thing to note is Penny's yo-yo doesn't just do all of this on command. You need to power it up with treats to temporarily transform the yo-yo, granting it abilities to protect Penny from damage, improve movement speed, and take down roaming hordes of penguins.

This transformation happens inside Penny's Big Breakaway's Story Mode, but there's more to the game than that. Evening Star says there are multiple game modes to show off your action skills and platforming prowess, including Time Attack Mode, where you can take on "the ultimate speedrunning challenge and dominate the leaderboard."

While there aren't any concrete details in the reveal trailer, the world of Macaroon seems filled with collectibles. In the trailer, I spot at least two types: one that looks like the standard currency collectible of this world and another that looks like a golden bolt. I'm excited to see what other collectibles there are, especially because collecting anything and everything is half the fun in 3D platformers like this. I hope there are plenty of costumes and other fun additions to buy using these collectibles.

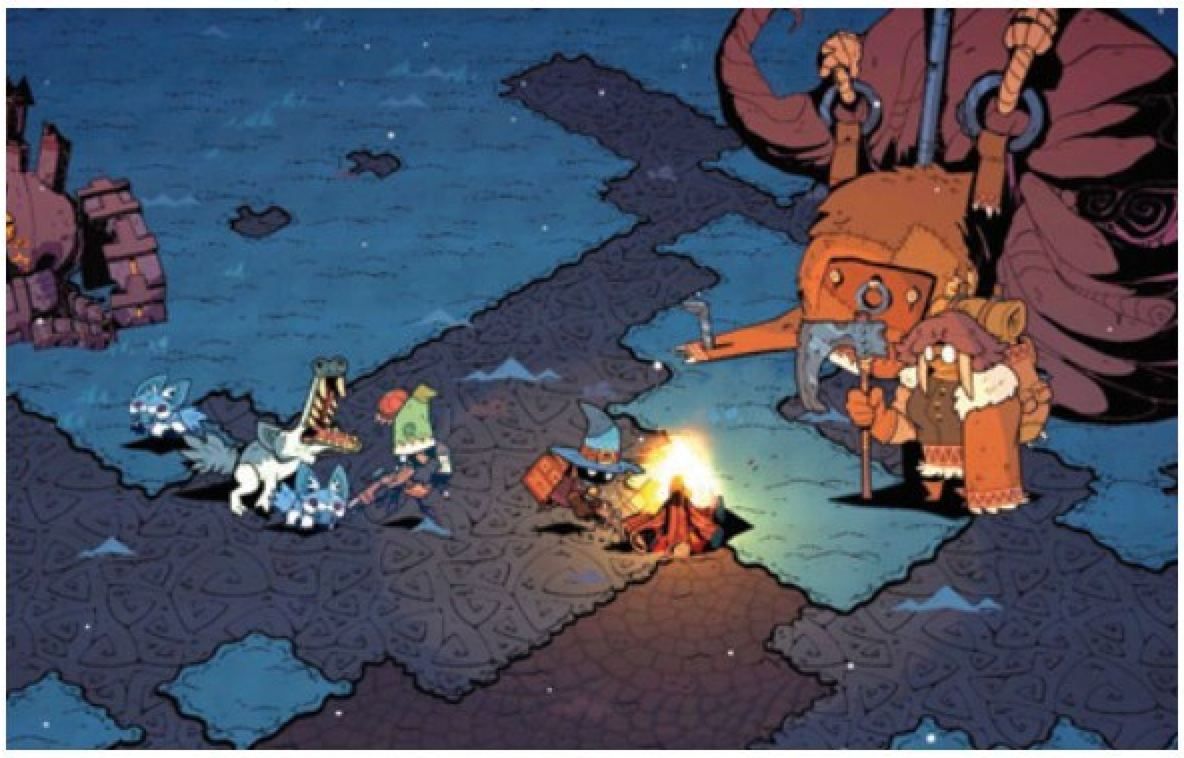
While the trailer only gives just a taste, I love the score of Penny's Big Breakaway so far. It's fun, uplifting, and, perhaps most importantly, catchy. Considering we'll probably be hearing specific tracks for hours as we track down every last collectible and enemy in Macaroon, it's important I don't get tired of listening to the same music after 10 minutes. What I hear in the trailer indicates the score is moving in the right direction.

Fortunately, we don't have to wait too much longer to hear the rest of that score because Penny's Big Breakaway hits PlayStation and Xbox consoles, Early Switch, and PC sometime in early 2024.

BY WESLEY LEBLANC

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Platforming
PUBLISHER Private Division
DEVELOPER Evening Star **RELEASE** Early 2024

WIZARD WITH A GUN

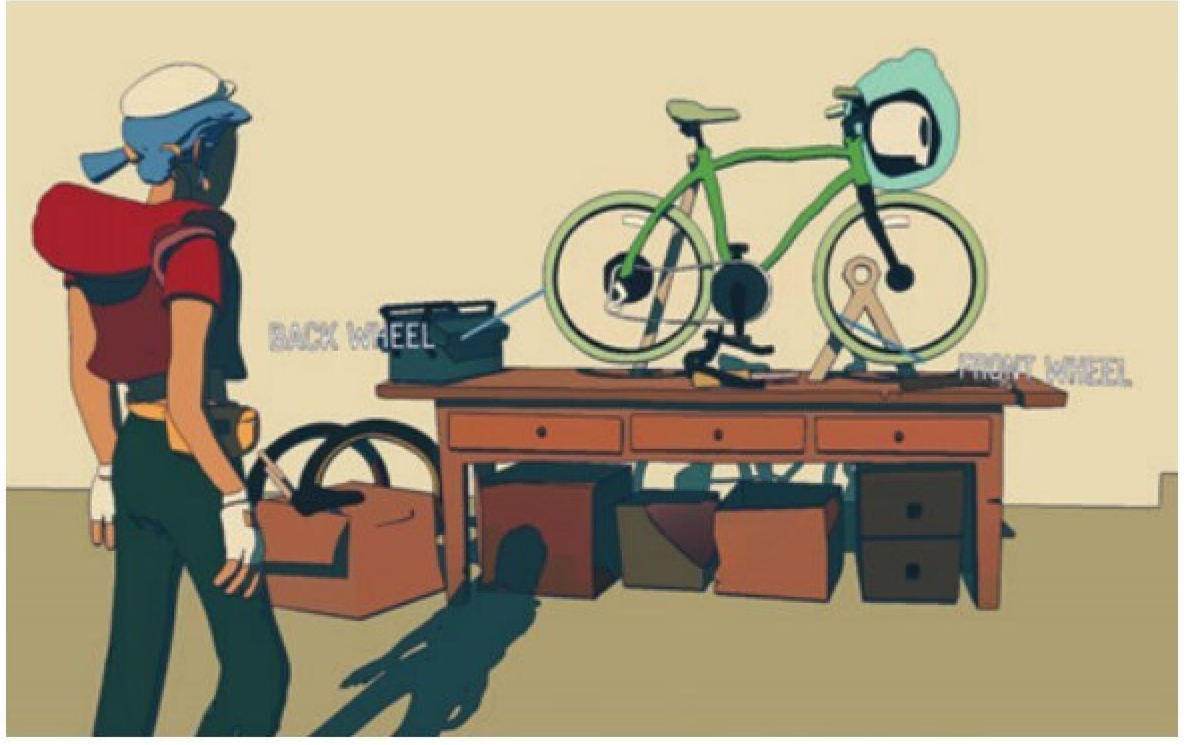


Combining a dark magic aesthetic with a subtle Old West theme, Wizard with a Gun tasks you, and maybe some friends, with surviving in a world that appears to be crumbling. The twin-stick action will be familiar to anyone who has played in the genre, and it plays well, but the hook is surviving in the face of randomly generated biomes with your guns and your friends. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action (2 to 4-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** Devolver Digital
DEVELOPER Galvanic Games **RELEASE** 2023

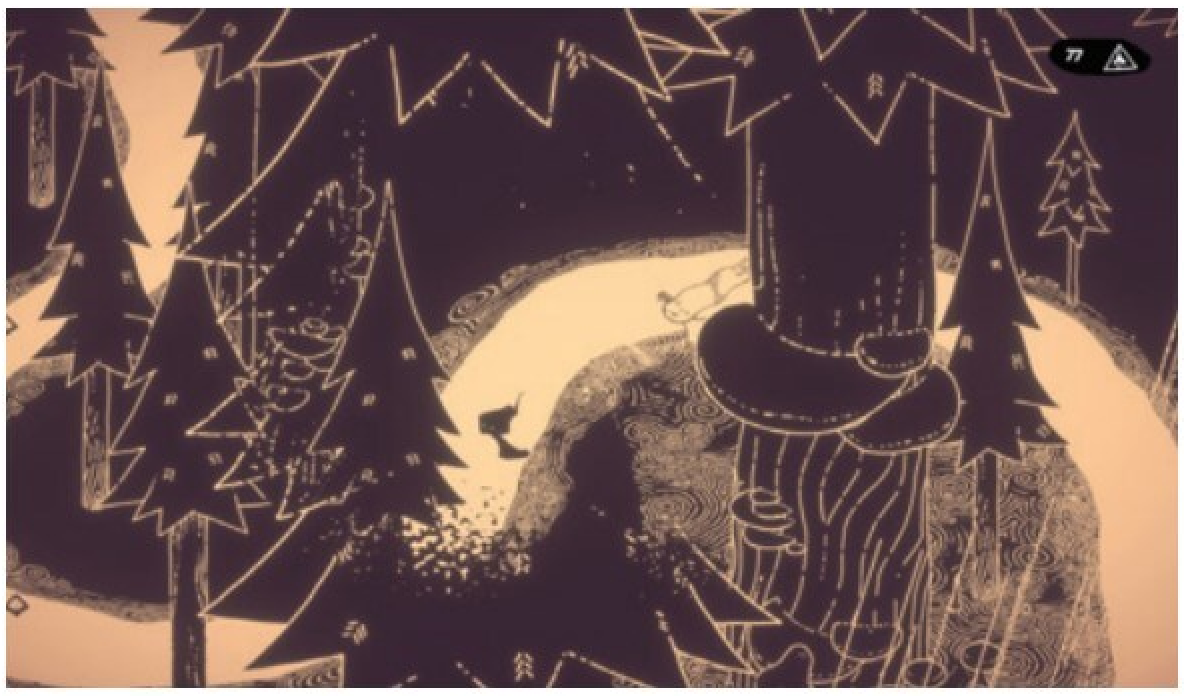
GHOST BIKE

Ghost Bike is a new biking game from the studio behind the Nidhogg series. Players control a "streetwise kid from Freehub City on a mission to revive the last of the Ghost Bikes, the magical couriers who rode between the world of the living and the world of the dead." Ride the ghost bike to the afterlife to race ghosts and more, all to win back "Ghost Power." **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**



PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1-Player Adventure/Racing **PUBLISHER** Annapurna Interactive
DEVELOPER Messhof **RELEASE** 2024

HAUNTII

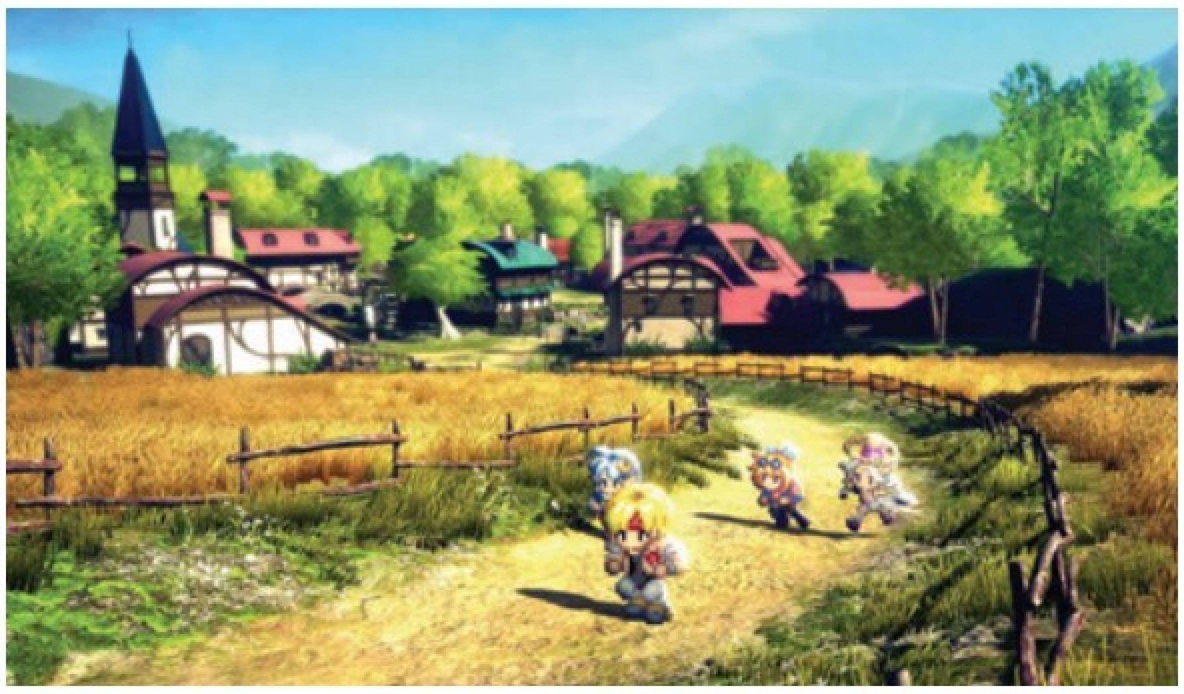


As the first five letters of the title promise, in Hauntii, you are a ghost that haunts various items in an abstract environment. Haunting can help you combat the occasional enemy, but it's mostly used to solve puzzles. In playing the game, however, it is the impressive visuals and a stirring soundtrack that elevate it all to something special. I was getting emotional after just a few minutes of play. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Firestoke
DEVELOPER Moonloop Games LLC
RELEASE 2024

STAR OCEAN: THE SECOND STORY R

Star Ocean: The Second Story is back, this time as a gorgeous HD-2D remake. You control either Claude or Rena as you embark on a wide-spanning galactic adventure to recruit allies, fight using a unique combat system, and power-up with various skills and plenty of gear. This remake features new illustrations, full voiceover by the original cast, and a newly rearranged score by Motoi Sakuraba. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**



PLATFORM PS5 • PS4 • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Square Enix **DEVELOPER** Gemdrops, Inc., Square Enix
RELEASE November 2

BALDUR'S GATE III

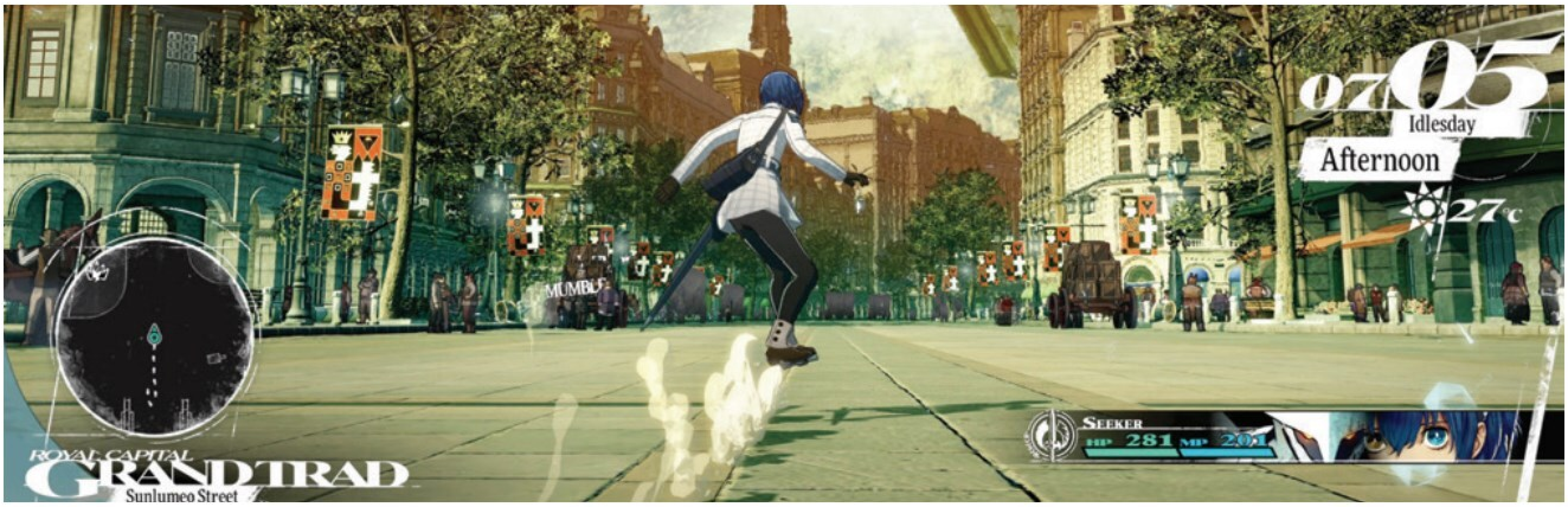
Larian's long-awaited Dungeons & Dragons game continues to wow at every opportunity, whether introducing a new villain played by Jason Isaacs, or touting the game's enormous tally of 170 hours of cinematics. It's a big game that's been long in arriving, but we have every reason to be hopeful in its capability to be a landmark RPG, whether you play on PC starting August 3 or wait for PS5 on September 6. **BY MATT MILLER**

PLATFORM PS5 • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Larian Studios **DEVELOPER** Larian Studios
RELEASE August 3 (PC), September 6 (PS5)

LUIGI'S MANSION: DARK MOON

Previously buried in Nintendo's past exclusively on the 3DS, Luigi's Mansion: Dark Moon rests in peace no longer. This portable sequel to the GameCube classic is being "visually enhanced" for release on the Switch. Charge your Strobulbs, switch on your Dark-Lights, and fire up the Poltergust 5000 – Mario will need to be saved when the game launches sometime next year.
BY CHARLES HARTE

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Nintendo **DEVELOPER** Next Level Games **RELEASE** 2024



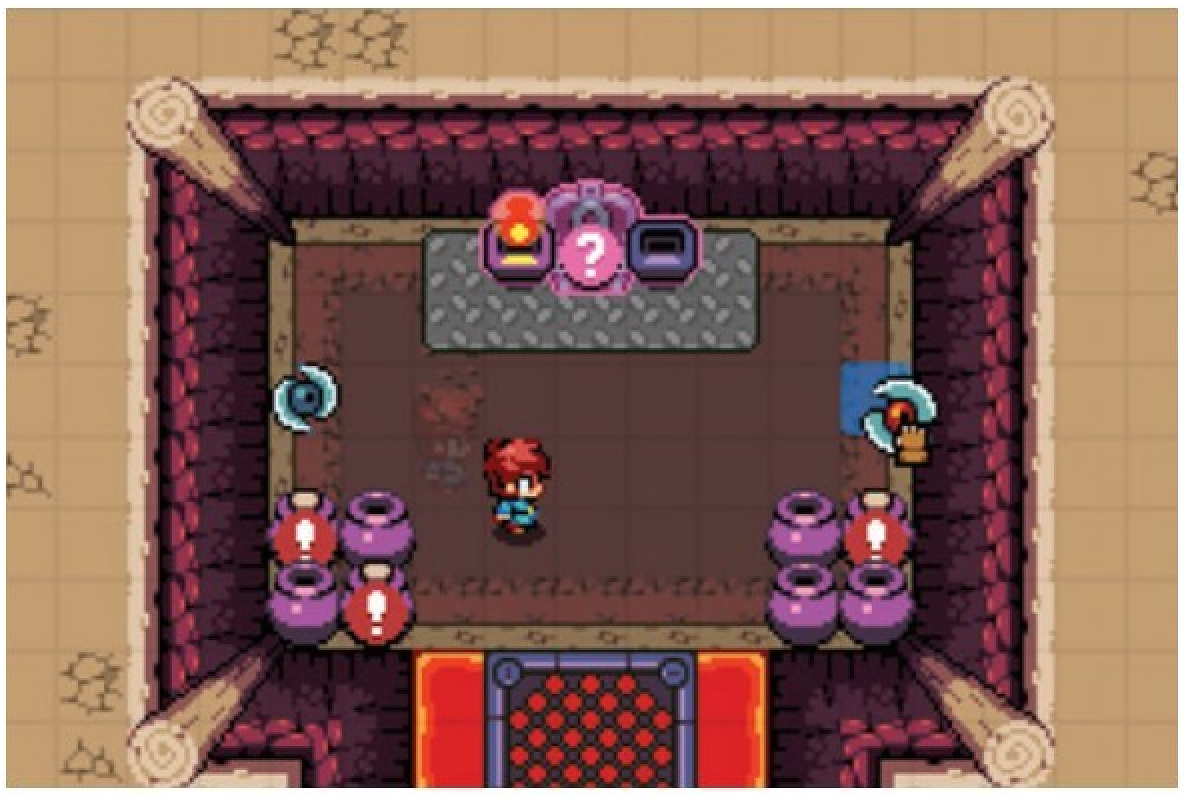
METAPHOR: REFANTAZIO

From the team that brought you Persona 3, 4, and 5, Metaphor: ReFantazio is Atlus' latest RPG. Previously known as Project Re Fantasy, the game combines a medieval aesthetic with clear influence from the Persona and Shin Megami Tensei series, complete with turn-based combat, a system for ranking up your bond with characters, and flashy menu design. Be ready to "face your fears and take back tomorrow" when the game comes out next year.

BY CHARLES HARTE

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Sega **DEVELOPER** Atlus **RELEASE** 2024

QUEST MASTER

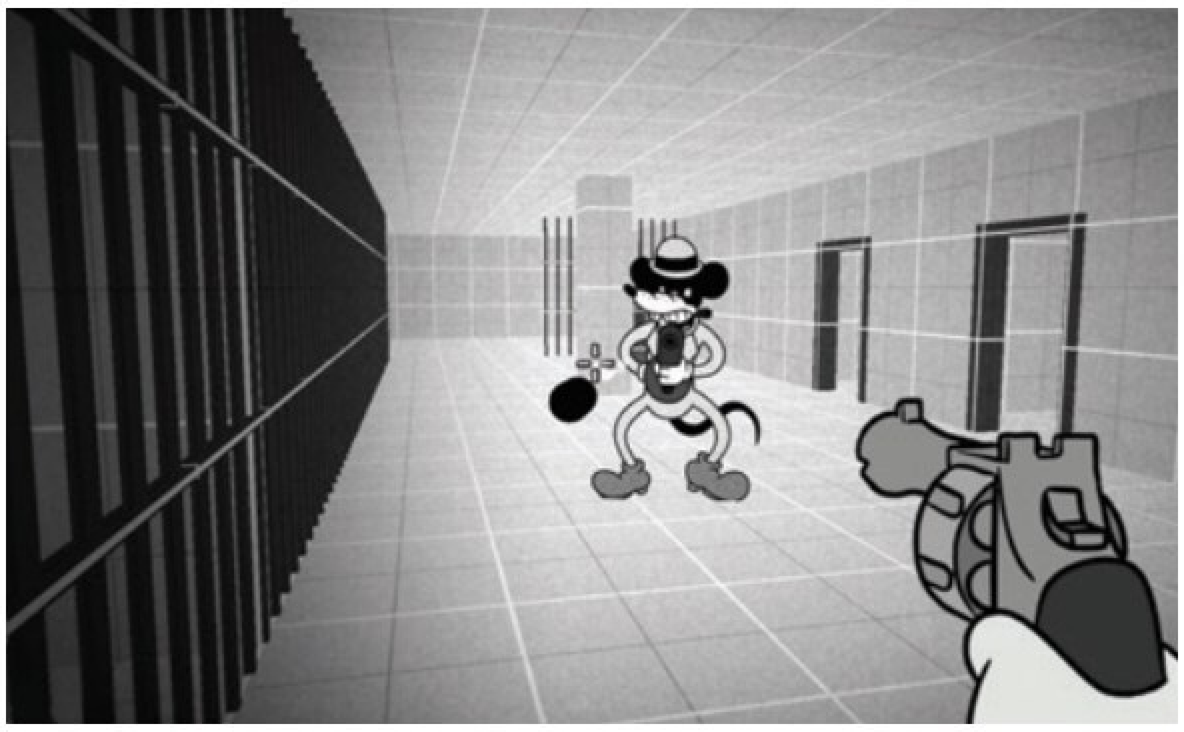


Think you can build a better Zelda game? Quest Master gives players the tools to do just that. With a presentation modeled after A Link to the Past, you construct 16-bit dungeons filled with traps, enemies, and puzzles that you can share online for others to explore. In turn, you can play dozens of player-created dungeons alone or in local co-op. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM Switch • PC **STYLE** 1 to 4-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Apogee Entertainment
DEVELOPER Skydevilpalm, Julian Creutz **RELEASE** TBA

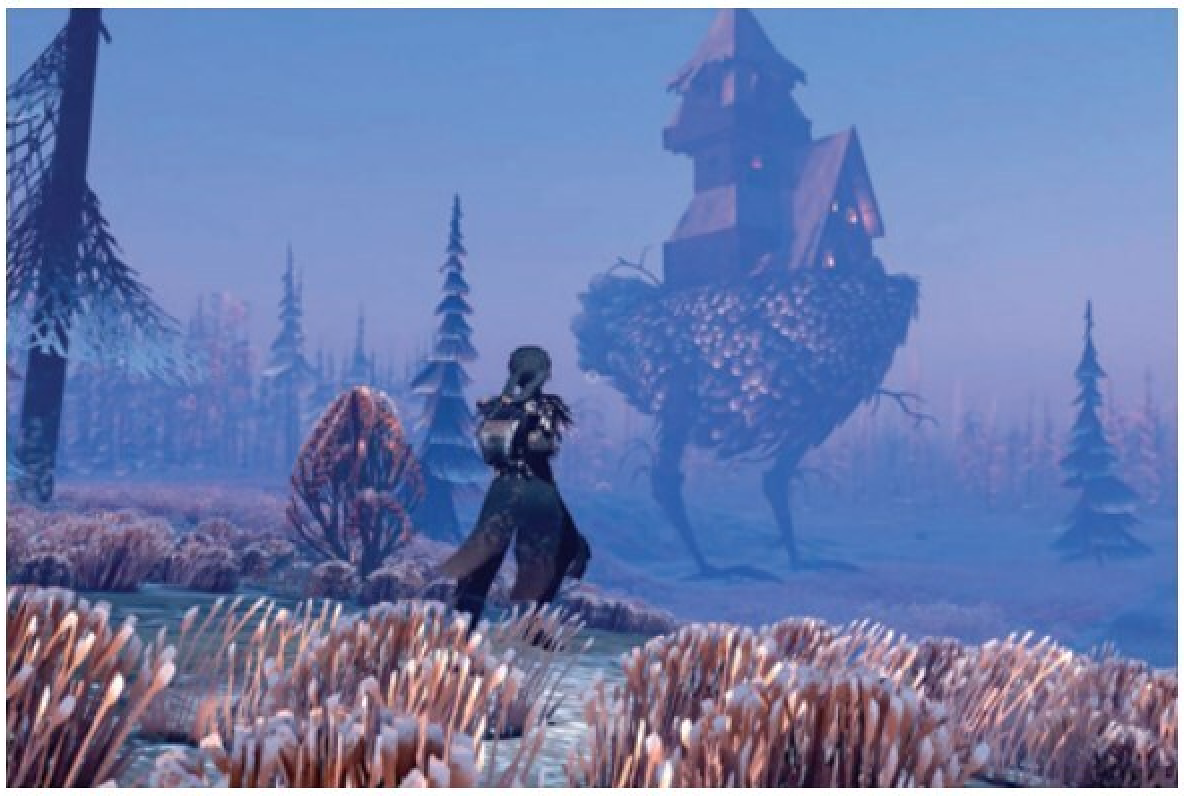
MOUSE

Similar to Cuphead, Mouse looks to the early era of animation, specifically the 1930s, for its aesthetic inspiration. In the game, which is a first-person shooter, you are private detective John Mouston in a corrupt, black-and-white noir city. You must cut through the corruption with a tommy gun in your hand and an oversized cigar in your mouth. Did I mention you are an anthropomorphic mouse? **BY KYLE HILLIARD**



PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Fumi Games
DEVELOPER Fumi Games **RELEASE** TBA

REKA

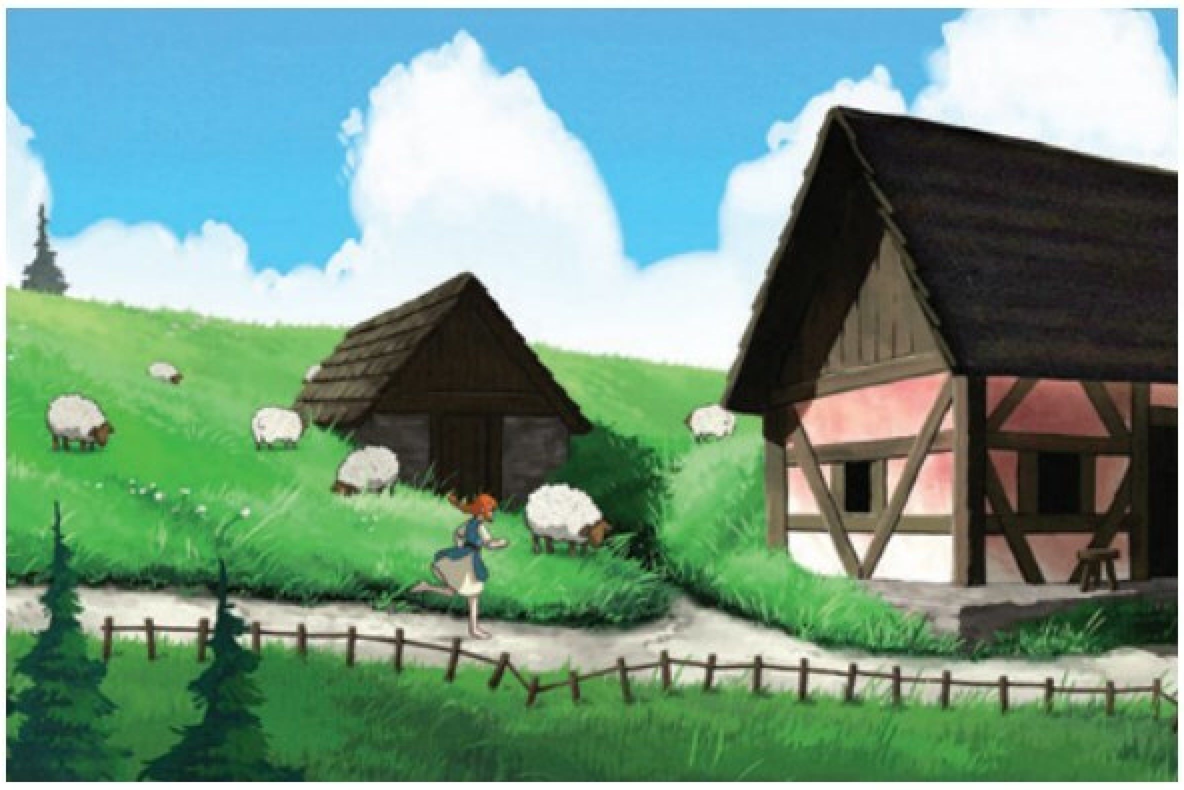


In Reka, you control a young witch trained by the mythical Baba Yaga, who travels in a unique mobile home: a cottage atop a giant chicken body. Your feathered home/companion can be customized to your liking as you embark on a journey of self-discovery in enchanted forests, swamps, and other locales, to learn spells, gather resources, and assist villagers. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** Fireshine Games
DEVELOPER Emberstorm Entertainment **RELEASE** 2024

SCARLET DEER INN

The impressive hook of Attu Games' Scarlet Deer Inn is that its characters are animated frame by frame by physically embroidering them with a needle and thread. The developer has shared videos of each frame of character animation being sewn together. The result is a unique style unseen in a 2D game, and the story appears to tell a dark narrative inspired by Slavic folklore. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

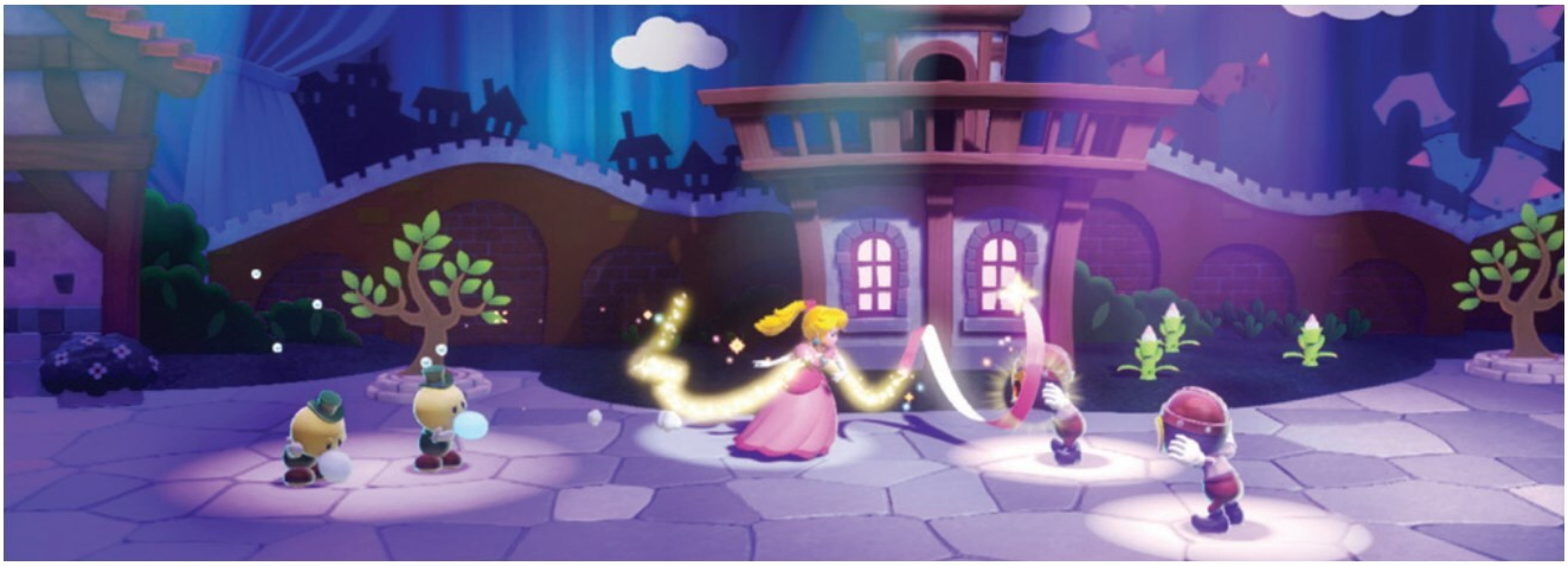


PLATFORM Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action **PUBLISHER** Attu Games
DEVELOPER Attu Games **RELEASE** TBA

UNTITLED PRINCESS PEACH GAME

Over the years, Peach has become much more than a damsel in distress, but since 2005's Super Princess Peach, she hasn't had much time in the spotlight. In her next solo adventure, she once again takes center stage, using magical streamer-like powers to defeat enemies and solve puzzles in a theater-themed adventure. We know very little (not even a name) but look forward to seeing Peach blossom on her own. **BY CHARLES HARTE** ■

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** TBA **PUBLISHER** Nintendo **DEVELOPER** Nintendo **RELEASE** 2024



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GI MUST PLAY

PIKMIN 4

Man's best friend(s)

Pikmin has always held a strange spot in Nintendo's library. Its creation is credited to Mario and Zelda's dad, Shigeru Miyamoto, which means Nintendo holds it in high esteem, but it's never quite reached the cultural ubiquity of his other works. Maybe it's unfair to compare the adorable strategy game about dragging the corpses of defeated foes into your spaceship to the iconic plumber and the Hero of Time, but Pikmin 4 might be the one that moves the series closer to those legacies. It represents a high point for Pikmin, thanks in large part to Oatchi, the helpful dog that can carry you and all your Pikmin on its back.

Pikmin 4 straddles that difficult line of welcoming newcomers while also featuring enough references that those who have been playing since 2001 will be charmed by returning characters and new lore. The story is not deep, to be clear: You must rescue yourself and others after crash landing on an alien planet with the help of Pikmin, but all the characters (and there are many) have unique personalities. More than ever, it also leans into the "Are we on Earth?" subtext the series has always featured, which is an element I've always enjoyed.

The star of the show, however, is Oatchi. He doesn't particularly look like a dog, but he acts like one, excitedly greeting you every morning for your daily adventure, defending you from danger, and helping your Pikmin carry objects they can't quite handle alone. In a game about managing a large group of helpful creatures, Oatchi is your fantastic assistant manager that does all the heavy lifting. His greatest strength, however, is carrying you and all your Pikmin with the press of a button. As visually interesting as it's always been to corral dozens of Pikmin and throw them at your problems, it always leads to annoying issues of them falling off bridges or getting caught on corners. Gathering all your Pikmin on Oatchi's back eliminates this problem and makes everything much more manageable, which lets you focus on the fun.

Finding and making new paths in the traditional Pikmin levels to expand your exploration avenues in the limited time frame is rewarding, and the locations are visually distinct, making them much easier to learn. They feel less like mazes, which I appreciate.

The addition of underground caves is another highlight. While underground, time slows for reasons that are thankfully handwaived away with funny dialogue, and you are free to play Pikmin without fear of the clock. These sections are frequent, enjoyable, and bite-sized. They never outstay their welcome (save for the marathon finale, but I enjoyed that as a last hurrah for the game), and they encourage new strategies in spaces designed to push you creatively.

You can also venture out at night for the first time in dedicated combat sequences where you worry less about losing Pikmin while defending a home base from encroaching enemies. The night sections are repetitive but rarely required for progress. It's the mode I engaged with the least, but I was happy to play them when I wanted a break from the typical gameplay.

Dandori sequences mix up the action even further with enjoyable competitive scenarios against A.I. opponents and sections where you are awarded medals for collecting the most in a limited amount of time. The former sequences are exciting and often intense, and the latter does a great job of making you pine for that perfect score. I replayed many despite having already completed the minimum requirements.

Oatchi, the caves, and Dandori are all excellent additions to Pikmin, but the new rewind option is arguably the one that most addressed my past frustrations. Rewind lets you roll back the clock a bit if you just need a little extra time at the end of a day or against that tough boss. Oatchi helps you take care of your Pikmin, and they are the smartest they have ever been, but I was still thankful for the rewind option, especially for some of the big challenges at the end. The mechanic is one I didn't lean on a lot, but I was so happy I could when I needed it.

When it comes to iterating on the standard Pikmin gameplay established by the first release, Pikmin 4 is the smoothest, best-controlling, best-looking version, and all the additions are worthwhile and fun to play. The variety of tasks, which you can tackle in the order of your choice, prevents you from doing the same thing for too long, and I enjoyed saving other survivors and expanding my home base roster. Pikmin may never rise to the top of the Nintendo heap, and it's probably unfair to expect it ever could, but the latest Pikmin is the best effort yet. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

9

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1-Player Action/Strategy **PUBLISHER** Nintendo
DEVELOPER Nintendo, Eighting **RELEASE** July 21 **RATING** E10+

FINAL FANTASY XVI

Victory in the land of gods and monsters

Final Fantasy XVI is bombastic, indulgent, and extreme, breaking far beyond the limits of what I thought an action-oriented Final Fantasy could pull off. It represents a pivotal shift for the series, ditching any semblance of turn-based move selection, active-time battles, or anything else in its history in favor of a fast-paced, extravagant, combo-heavy combat system that continued to grow more robust throughout my 60-plus hour journey.

There's a linear action game in FFXVI, and it's the highlight of the experience. But standard RPG tropes, mechanics, and the game's more open nature outside of the story-based dungeon quests slow an otherwise explosive story about gods, Eikons, crystals, and the meaning of free will. Still, FFXVI's highs are easily some of the highest in the series, and even action games.

The story begins as a revenge tale against the backdrop of slavery; in Valisthea, Bearers, or people that can use magic, are enslaved, moved, traded, and sold to whomever and wherever they're needed. FFXVI fails to say anything new or remarkable on that front, but the story eventually drops that discussion to focus on other, more general pillars of Valisthean life that must be toppled. And it's here the story shines. Though sometimes a little too close to its *Game of Thrones* inspiration to feel original, the voice cast behind these characters commits to every beat, and it works.

The story is strengthened by a gorgeous visual style, although there are areas where I am less impressed, like its often plastic NPCs and poorly performing Performance mode. Nonetheless, when the visual pieces like U.I., environments, and flashy combat effects blend, the entire visual presentation shines. However, it's sometimes hard to see through it all to understand what's happening.

The open-field areas are the least impressive. They're large but mostly unmemorable empty spaces, save for an occasional side quest, random treasure, or horde of enemies. Their emptiness speaks to my largest issue with FFXVI – it's an excellent action game, but the same can't be said for it as an RPG. There are dozens of crafting materials, and I can't tell you one because crafting is less of a system in FFXVI and more of a word. There aren't weapons that work better with this type of build or that – there's only the strongest weapon, and it's obvious it's the one you should craft. And save for some endgame weapons, you'll always have the materials needed if you complete story missions and the occasional side quest. The same goes for other pieces of gear.

It's the Eikonic powers where FFXVI's RPG mechanics come into play. As Clive gains the powers of more Eikons throughout the story, he gains access to new abilities, allowing players to rework their build. I especially fell in love with my Phoenix-Garuda-Bahamut combo. Additional accessories strengthened this, such as one that reduced the cooldown on my heavy-hitting Phoenix ability by 12 seconds. But outside of these abilities and accessories, FFXVI is disappointingly linear for an RPG. Players who reach the credits will likely have access to the majority of the same weapons, accessories, and skills. It's how they're mixed and matched where playstyle diversity appears.

Side quests feature a surprising amount of detail and depth, with a dose of great storytelling too. However, the pace and mechanical content of these side quests, and everything that happens outside the primary narrative, simply don't compare to what the main missions are doing, and they feel significantly slower and less exciting.

Creative Business Unit III has created my favorite action combat system to date. It's fast, easy to understand on its surface, and has a lot of depth. This combat system also powers some of my all-time favorite moments in video games. The boss fights in FFXVI are a damn treat and though some are significantly better than others, almost all of them left me in awe. It helps that composer Masayoshi Soken's masterful score envelops every scene, including these boss fights, creating some of my favorite musical tracks in the expansive Final Fantasy catalog.

FFXVI has some of my favorite moments in modern Final Fantasy, but its lows threaten the pace at which they arrive. I wish FFXVI's various elements were intertwined more seamlessly. Still, when I look back at my time with Clive, his friends, his enemies, and Valisthea, it's those highs that I vividly remember. FFXVI is very different from its predecessors, but in many ways, very familiar; And it's still a Final Fantasy, through and through, reminding me why I love this series so much.

BY WESLEY LEBLANC

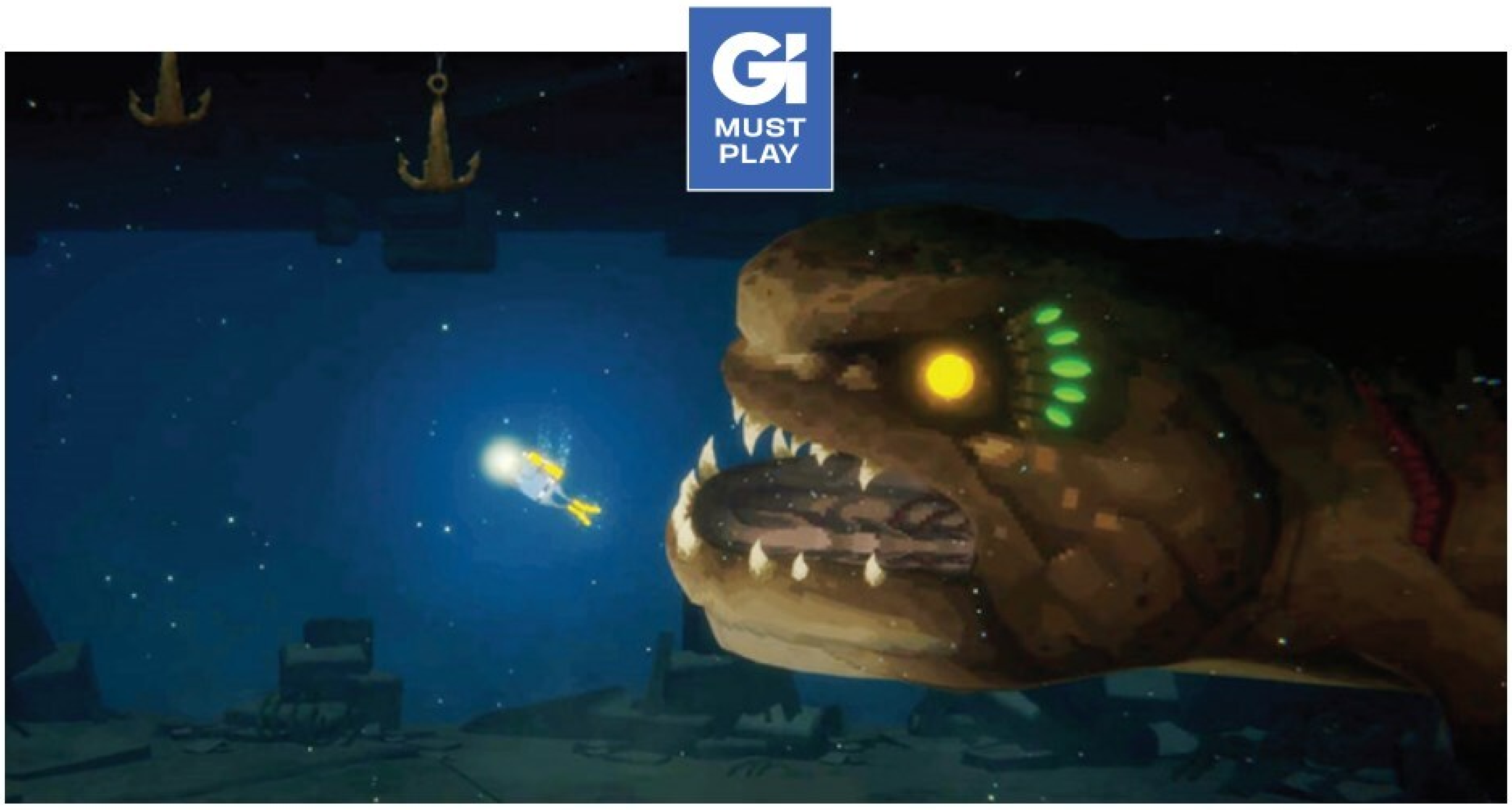
8.5

PLATFORM PS5
STYLE 1-Player Action/Role-Playing
PUBLISHER Square Enix
DEVELOPER Creative Business Unit III
RELEASE June 22 **RATING** M

DAVE THE DIVER

A refreshing departure

MUST PLAY



Like a beautiful and unusual fish that has suddenly risen to the surface, Dave the Diver is an unexpected surprise. Juggling two core systems that work in tandem, it's a game that excels as both an exploration experience and as a management sim and does so in ways that are intuitive and easy to pick up. However, the real triumph is a focus on novelty at every turn, with a near-constant supply of sudden twists, activities, and ways to engage with the game, resulting in a joyful and approachable adventure that is hard to put down. .

Dave is a scuba diver, summoned to a strange blue hole in the ocean filled with all manner of marine life. He's there to help capture seafood for a local sushi restaurant and its eccentric but expert chef, and he's soon drawn into the management of the business to an equal depth as his sea explorations. As those underwater investigations swim ever further from the surface, new fantastical elements enter the equation, from sea people to prehistoric creatures, keeping players guessing on both the story and gameplay front.

The underwater dives are uncomplicated but gorgeous, leveraging a pixel-art aesthetic to present a considerable variety of undersea life and a constantly shifting landscape of cliffs, chasms, and tunnels. With guns, harpoons, nets, and more, Dave must snag the tastiest morsels to bring back to the restaurant while monitoring his air tank, avoiding hostile species, and gathering additional supplies. The simple aiming and shooting are enjoyable, and the gradual upgrade of equipment provides a rewarding sense of progression. But the search for new sights and locales drives the fun.

Back above water, Dave is wrangled into serving duties behind the sushi counter amid an offbeat cast of characters, many of whom drive home a theme that people are often more and better than they appear at first glance. Setting menu items, hiring and training staff, and pouring drinks give way to more activities, like running a farm and fish hatchery, competing in reality food competitions, and fleeing pirate boats to protect ancient relics – most with an attached minigame or interactive component.

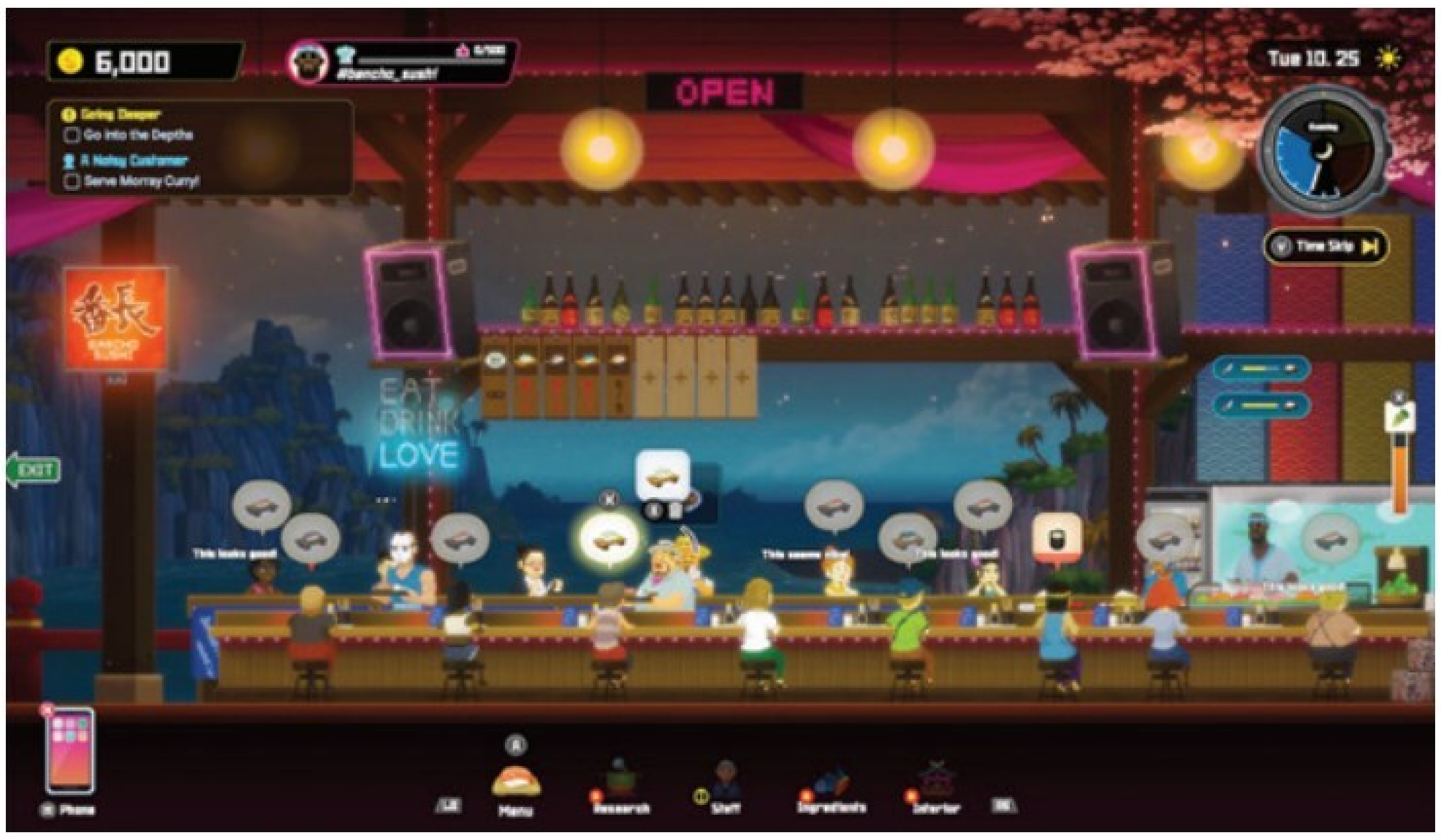
The continual layering of these small but rewarding systems transforms Dave the Diver into something exceptional. The flip back and forth between diving action and sushi restaurant management is engaging but might become rote were it not for the constant influx of other new ideas to keep things fresh. Taking wildlife photos, halting invasive fish species, building new weapons, cataloging discovered creatures – everything works together to push the adventure forward while remaining forgiving enough in complexity that a player never feels overwhelmed.

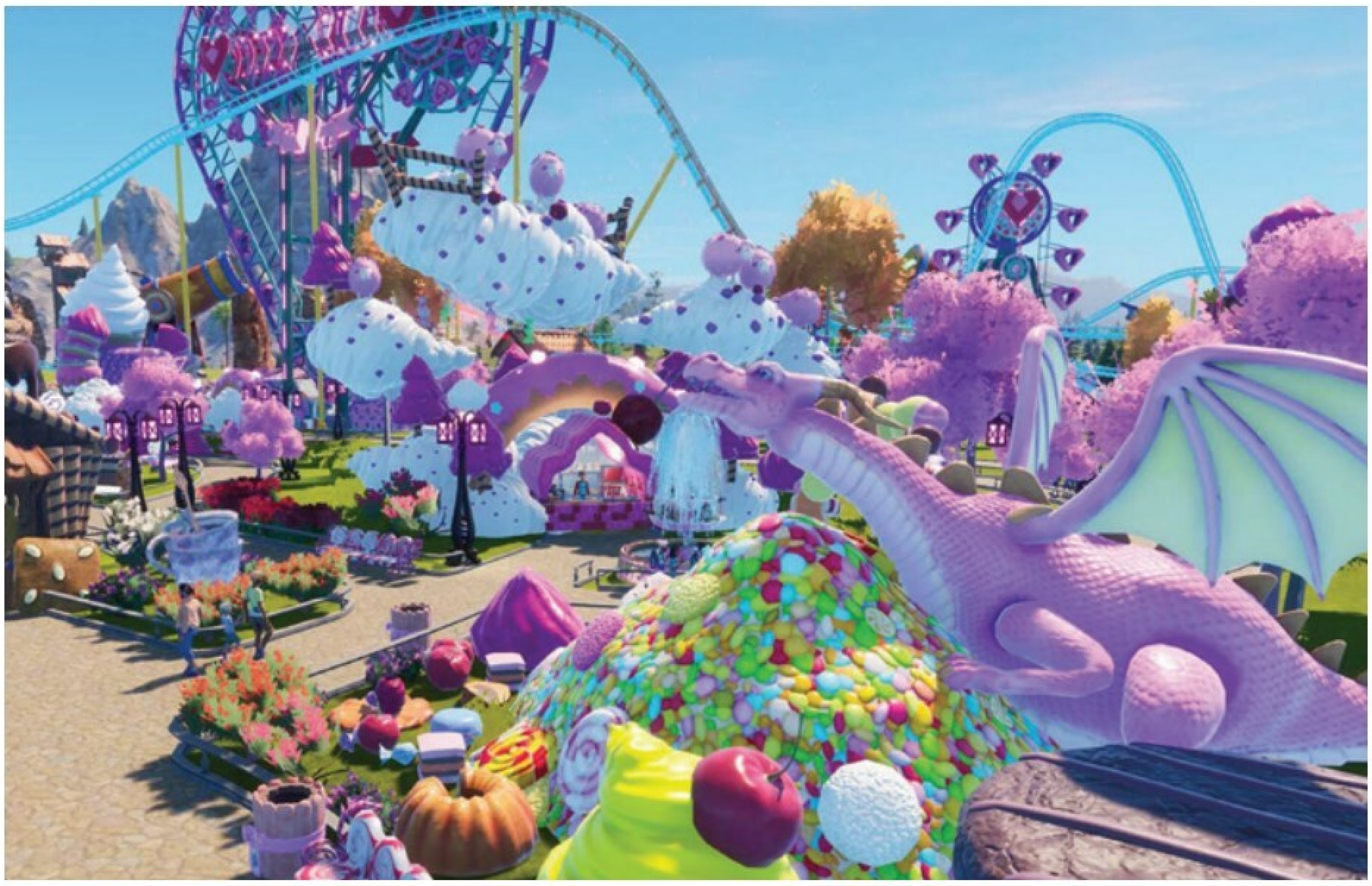
Dave is a charming hero, affable and guileless but capable, kind, and eager to help his friends. As the story grows more outlandish, the bosses ever bigger and more unbelievable, and the story sillier, the grounded and likable lead kept me smiling. A few late-game activities, including some stealth and light beam puzzles, don't completely hit the mark, but by that point, the investment is high, and it's easy to push ahead to the end.

You might question whether a sushi restaurant management sim crossed with underwater diving is your cup of tea, but that would be missing the point. Dave the Diver is a unique and memorable vacation away from expectations, and it's the very fact that you don't usually play games like this that makes it so satisfying. **BY MATT MILLER**

8.75

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Mintrocket **DEVELOPER** Mintrocket
RELEASE June 28 **RATING** NR





PARK BEYOND

Life is a rollercoaster

Promising an unconventional approach to rollercoaster construction as players design the theme park of their dreams, Limbic Entertainment's Park Beyond is yet another business-building simulator that attempts blending "unlimited" creativity with fiscal responsibility. A familiar pitch with some quirky set dressing, you'll create your own custom coasters, plop down drag-and-drop shops, and hire staff to create a successful venture that's profitable and exciting – but most importantly, profitable.

Despite a feature-length tutorial in custom coaster construction, Park Beyond's campaign starts strong by consistently letting you tinker with exciting new mechanics, empowering you to unleash your wildest creations in dusty deserts and lush alpine forests. But as I started to balance my building around the proposed financial and spacial limits, I felt my creativity was quickly kneecapped by frustrating forced goals.

Simulations are always a balancing act between resources and imagination. However, the finickiness and overcomplication of some of Park Beyond's tasks made for play sessions where, more often than not, I was sitting at my desk fast-forwarding through in-game months to trudge through dull, unskippable busywork. Surprisingly, making my toilets profitable was not on my "Build Your Dream Theme Park" bingo card.

Not all building systems are made equal in Park Beyond, with different types of customization arriving with different rules. Where the prefab buildings and custom coaster builds use a modular placement system and require specific amounts of space, miscellaneous decorative items like trees and rocks can be placed freeform onto your structures. This made manipulating the space an approachable process and encouraged me to create organic and appealing environments. One nice addition was the ability to completely customize shops by building extensions around a base structure which, with significant effort, can result in a truly bespoke creation. However, this method does come with some caveats, as it can get a little finicky and time-consuming when you get into the weeds of roofing and signage.

Your park's success depends on three main requirements: Money, Fun, and Amazement. Each ride, shop, toilet, and staff member contributes in differing amounts, meaning you'll be spinning plates to keep the lights on. Amazement is the most compelling currency, as it allows you to "Impossify" your rides, shops, and staff, adding visual flair and increasing their efficiency. This lets you meaningfully develop and personalize your setup, but the slow burn of filling up the meter eventually became a chore.

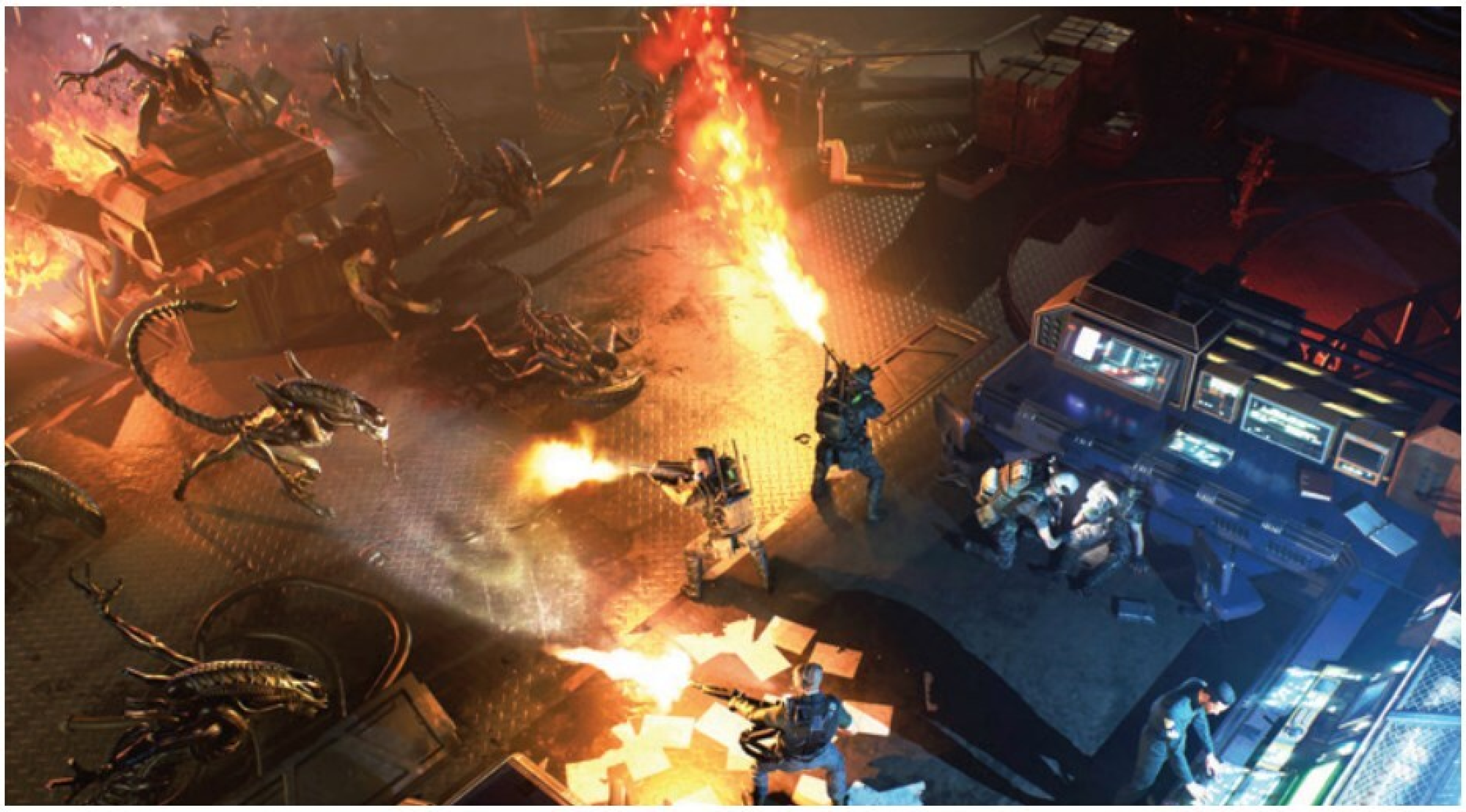
Despite its pacing stumbles, Park Beyond succeeds with its delightful animations and dramatic ride designs that made my stomach twist and turn. There's a wonderful twinkling ambiance in the evenings too, and this let me clock out of my fiscal fears occasionally so I could enjoy the zany world I'd built in peace. Though, that all comes crashing down as the sun rises the next morning, and you notice your margins aren't good enough to fund your latest silly endeavor.

Sandbox Mode ended up becoming a refreshing alternative, where I could focus on my own design dreams without the ceaseless interventions. Here you can decide on a starting budget and location and set specific goals curating your own set of challenges. While you still have to manage your dreams, I finally felt like I was my own boss. I could build and experiment with greater depth while accepting financial defeat – which feels like a better distillation of the game's ambitions.

Even with its twisted takes on nostalgic ride designs and copious whimsical fanfare, I was left feeling deflated by Park Beyond's business-oriented objectives and lack of investment in unbridled player creativity. For a game that endeavors to push the limits of your imagination, it's a little too concerned with whether you're tall enough to ride. **BY SARAH THWAITES**

6.5

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Simulation
PUBLISHER Bandai Namco **DEVELOPER** Limbic Entertainment **RELEASE** June 15 **RATING** E



ALIENS: DARK DESCENT

New terrifying potential

An unsettling stillness permeated the station. Buildings were scrambled on the inside – rooms dotted with bloody streaks and furniture upturned. Guttural sounds echoed from ebony nests; pounding steps grew louder the longer my marines stayed still. While not a survival-horror title, Aliens: Dark Descent masterfully bottles the franchise's menacing ambiance. It comes packaged as a solid squad-management XCOM-lite puffing a new terrifying style. But while it respects the source material and nails its inspirations rather well, squad coordination and battles can be a bit unruly and frustratingly unfair at times.

Crash landing on the moon Lethe, a Xenomorph outbreak slings you into the shoes of former Wayland-Yutani administrator Maeko Hayes and U.S. colonial Marines officer Jonas Harper. The narrative comes out swinging in that everything-goes-to-hell Alien fashion but slips in a few jaw-droppers and humanizes characters, keeping you hooked and pleasantly paying off for investing in where Dark Descent heads.

You lead a squad as a single unit into mission zones colored with objectives and resources. Fog of war concealed enemies as I huddled troops through doorways – keeping an eye on a pulsing radar. During these times, memories of Alien: Isolation came to mind, and Dark Descent actually replicates aspects of that hair-raising hook. Suspense and zone layout add terrifying substance to exploration, and that tension explodes during battles.

Players gun down iconic creatures like Facehuggers and Alien Queens through real-time battles. A click of a button slows down or pauses encounters to focus squad fire. The mannerisms of Xenomorphs are faithful to the series, with them wildly charging and dragging off my soldiers when possible. Using squad resources to shoot a wide-spreading shotgun or flamethrower provided loadout depth and control as my marines automatically fired.

Unfortunately, stealth sections through packs of sleeping Xenomorphs make squad movement feel cumbersome. And at times, crouching and clicking other buttons aren't snappy, leading to deadly encounters with enemies. Depending on your last save after a sour death, you may have to backtrack to prepare and slog back to try again. Dark Descent is aware of its difficulty – as noted by the tutorials – but the difficulty spikes, backtracking, and clunky controls can be annoying to work around.

When not in sweaty combat scenarios, battles are fast and lean into more playful complexity as you level up troops. Harkening to XCOM, there are role-based classes that excel at gunnery or hacking with a flying bot. Without a Tecker, I couldn't unlock specific doors. Medics revive teammates from a comatose state, and Sergeants provide crucial stat boosts. Each class feels instrumental during a given mission.

At your home base, you can spend supplies to get your class' unique skills or assign physicians to get injured soldiers back into the field quicker. Under the hood of Dark Descent is the framework of an XCOM game. I initially believed this design to be a safe crutch, but there's a satisfying progression loop cooking here that works jointly with the setup of an Alien story, becoming enjoyable the more you pour into it.

Soaked in dark sci-fi environments and human personalities, Dark Descent nails the hallmarks of an Alien title and executes much of its squad-based gameplay. Despite some downsides and squad control during precise moments, plenty of its elements kept me jacked in to see its conclusion. It was a thrilling ride with ups and downs, but I left fulfilled and appreciated its experimental twists.

BY ANTHONY JONES

8

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1-Player Action/Strategy
PUBLISHER Focus Entertainment
DEVELOPER Tindalos Interactive
RELEASE June 20 **RATING** M

OXENFREE II: LOST SIGNALS

A sequel worth the wait

Oxenfree II: Lost Signals delivers what I wanted from the sequel seven years after the first game's release. Although its overarching A-to-C narrative feels like it's missing a "B" in the journey, I'm impressed with most of what Oxenfree II accomplishes. It brings back the original's simple but charming radio mechanics, adds a walkie-talkie that expands the world around protagonist Riley, and, most importantly, features incredibly well-written and believable characters. While Oxenfree II's paranormal events are spooky and cold, the cast is warm, bright, and complex, and the entire package feels like an '80s summer romp.

If Oxenfree is about teenagers messing with timelines, then Oxenfree II is about the lesser-seen adults dealing with their mess afterward. Set five years after the original game, Riley arrives in her hometown of Camena for day one of a new environmental research job. She grew up here and left for reasons you discover later, and finds herself returning as a 30-something-year-old for work.

She soon meets Jacob, her new colleague, and after the two place a transmitter high on the island, things go awry. A familiar triangular prism appears over the sky of Oxenfree's Edwards Island, visible in the distance. As the duo explores Camena, they discover a cult, stubborn angsty teenagers, ghostly apparitions, some familiar faces, and more.

Mechanically, Oxenfree II plays like its predecessor. You explore an island; pick dialogue options that paint the protagonist as sarcastic, kind, or cold; and solve simple puzzles using a radio. The walkie-talkie is technically a new mechanic, but it's mostly just another avenue for dialogue. I don't mind the lack of mechanical innovation in the sequel, but if Oxenfree's heavy focus on narrative and light gameplay turn you off, this game might do the same. Just be wary when quitting the game, as terrible checkpointing without a clear save function caused me to replay several sections, dampening my excitement from playing them the first time.

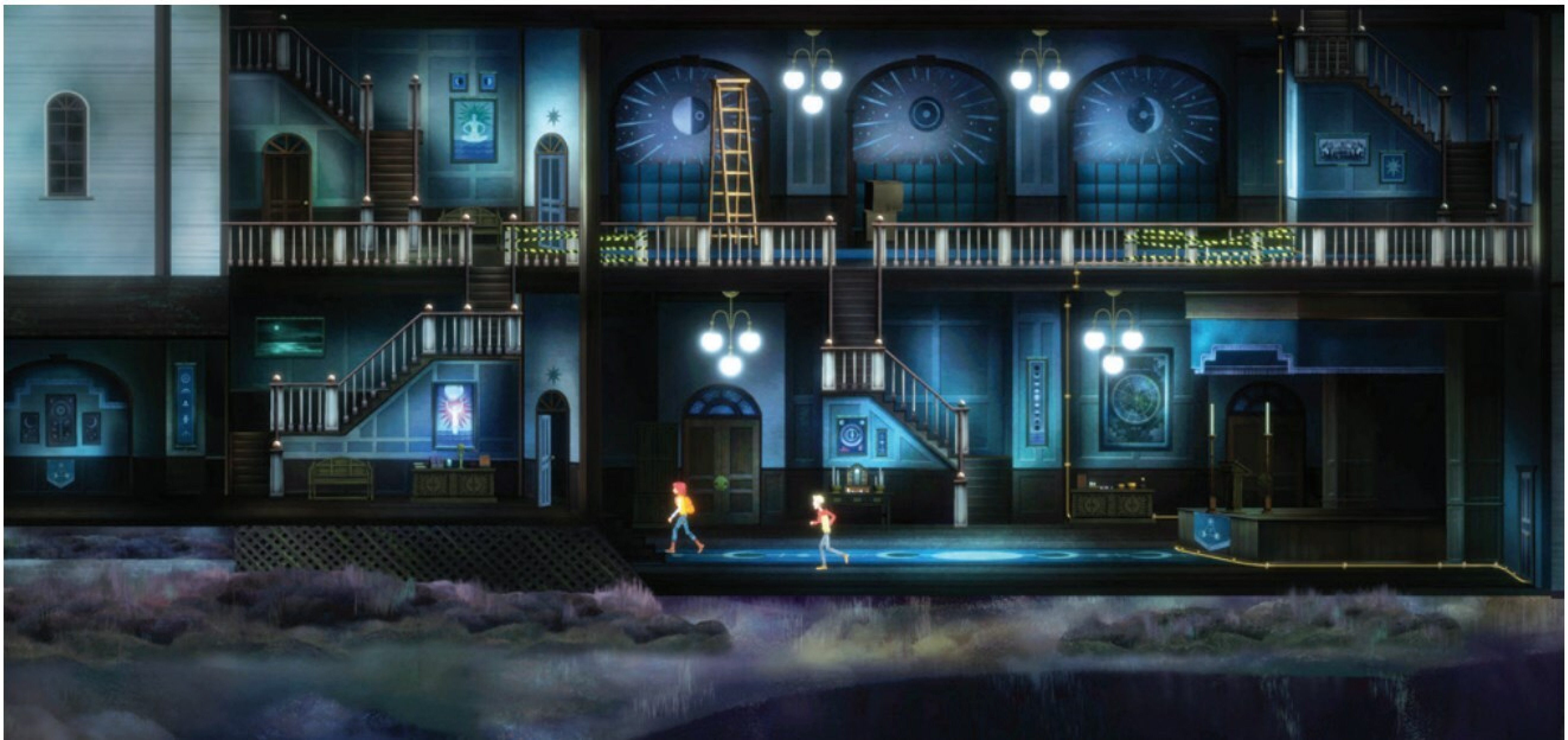
I can't express enough how much I enjoy the conversations between every character. Not only are they well-written, filled with romanticized language designed to get you in your feelings, but the voice cast delivers sincerity in every line, with Riley and Jacob as the clear standouts.

I especially love Oxenfree II's more mature tone and story because it bucks the trend of adults who think they know what's best for teenagers. Instead, it lets players decide how Riley and Jacob treat them, and that freedom leads to some surprising twists. These excellent conversations and plot surprises are the highlight of the narrative experience for me, but the overarching story falls somewhat flat. It feels rushed, almost as if it's missing a second act, but I did enjoy what the game was trying to say. Oxenfree II feels methodically slow and then, all at once, desperate to end, and it's jarring.

Oxenfree II doesn't shake up what its predecessor did in 2016, but it delivers more of the excellent writing and charm I expect from Night School Studio. While it's light on gameplay beyond traversal, it's done in service of the characters. After 10 hours with this cast, I want more, but I'm happy with where this story ends and how my choices shaped that ending. Despite bad checkpointing and a swift rush to the conclusion after an overly long setup, this return feels earned and essential, with a message that resonates far more than Oxenfree's. With Oxenfree II behind me, I'm thrilled Night School Studio delivered something special more than seven years away from this world. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

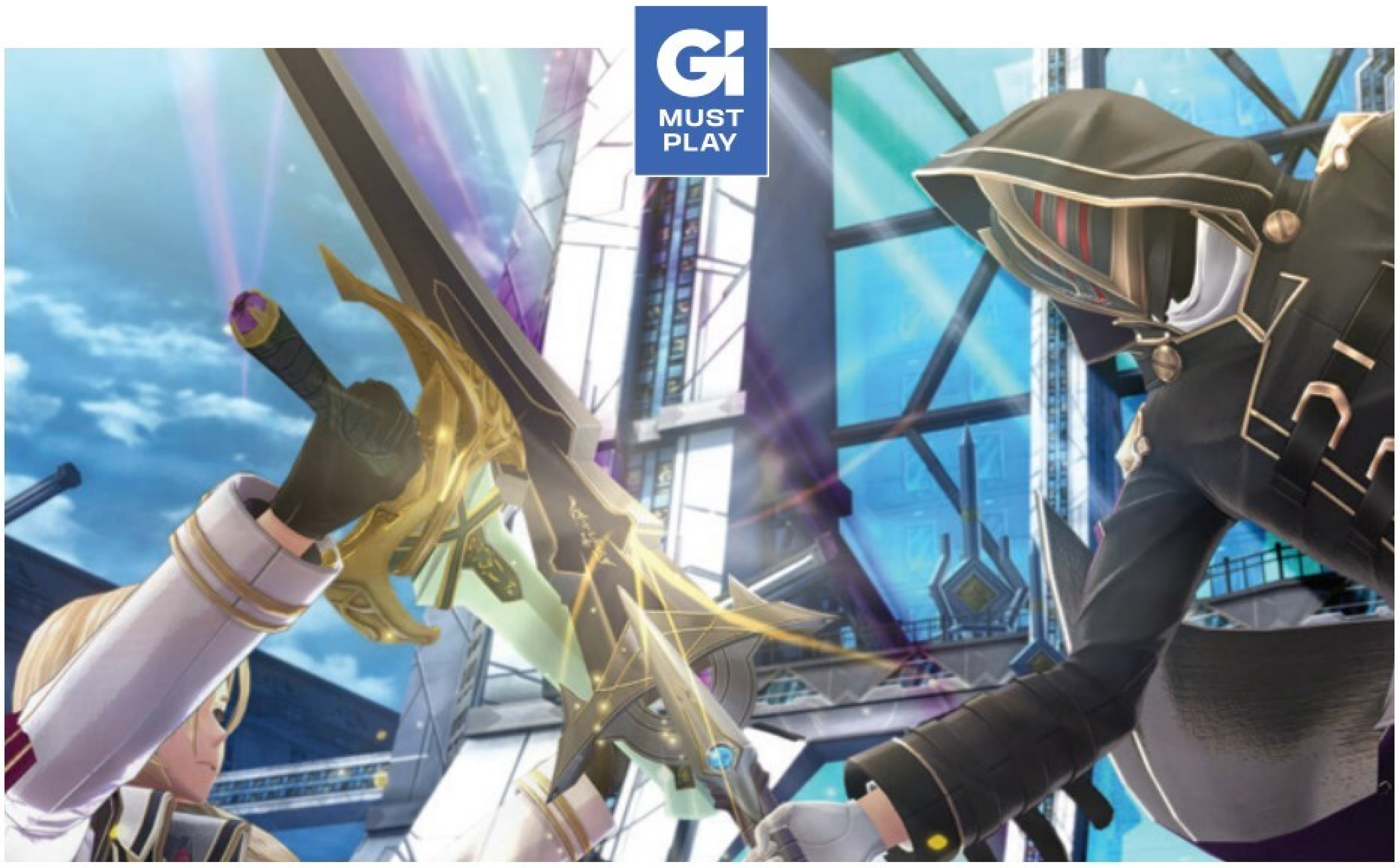
8

PLATFORM PS5 • PS4 • Switch • PC • iOS • Android **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure
PUBLISHER Netflix **DEVELOPER** Night School Studio
RELEASE July 12 **RATING** T



THE LEGEND OF HEROES: TRAILS INTO REVERIE

The end of an era



For almost 20 years, Nihon Falcom has created one of the richest ensembles of original characters, history, and politics in video games with The Legend of Heroes. Across three narrative arcs (and counting), the latest entry, Trails into Reverie, is a bittersweet culmination; I must potentially say goodbye to some of these characters for good after the series successfully captured my heart.

After the countless emotional moments of joy, shock, and tragedy, the further I progressed in Reverie, the more I was afraid of bidding farewell to these wonderful and gratifying characters I've come to love so dearly. The combat continues to build and evolve, and even though the story is arguably the weakest in the series so far, the profound ongoing theme of what shapes someone into the person they are has stuck with me since. By the time credits rolled, all I could think about was how grateful I was to reach this point and experience this unique epic in the first place.

Six months have passed since the end of The Great Twilight and now that the autonomous state of Crossbell has been freed by Erebonia, it is finally announcing its independence until a familiar foe halts the plans. Compared to the rest of the series, Reverie is the most off-the-beaten-path narrative, weaving a comparatively streamlined experience, but it continues to have the high-quality storytelling and character development longtime fans expect.

Instead of focusing on one main character, three different branches focus on a specific character – a series first. Reverie puts you back in the shoes of former main protagonists Lloyd and Rean, along with a masked individual named "C." These characters' paths diverge into another compelling narrative where each of them overcomes the personal burdens they've been struggling with for the past several games. Each character's story reaches a satisfying conclusion, and I'm glad there's a chance for them to return in future entries.

Combat throughout the series, while great, has more or less been the same since the beginning. It has been simplified over time, which is upsetting, but the core elements have remained intact. The one notable mechanic introduced in this entry is called "United Front," where you can unleash an all-out attack that deals massive damage to your enemies or heal your entire party. It didn't fundamentally change the way I approached fights compared to previous entries, but it definitely helped me get out of some tight spots.

Aside from the story, the main gameplay experience is set in a pocket place of existence known as the True Reverie Corridor. Its main purpose is to serve as a dungeon crawler to level up your party. As I explored each floor, I found treasures and formidable enemies that give me sealing stones which unlock new characters, minigames, and "daydreams." These compelling slice-of-life moments are my favorite unlock, as they focus on events from different members in the cast that happen between the events of Cold Steel IV and Trails into Reverie. The best part of The Legend of Heroes is the vast number of well-written detailed characters, but the main story zeroes in on a select few. The result is what feels like an intimate last hurrah with them.

Decades of world-building, character arcs, and detailed lore have led to The Legend of Heroes' culmination. The franchise is one that should be recognized alongside icons like Final Fantasy, Dragon Quest, Kingdom Hearts, and Persona. Reverie has the intimidating task of closing the page on three arcs that expanded across nearly two decades' worth of characters and storytelling. Even if the narrative in this chapter falls short compared to past entries, it still stands above most other games in the genre. If Trails into Reverie is the last time we see most of these beloved characters, it serves as a terrific send-off.

BY CAMERON HAWKINS

8.75

PLATFORM PS5 • PS4 • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Role-Playing
PUBLISHER NIS America
DEVELOPER Nihon Falcom **RELEASE** July 7
RATING T

CRASH TEAM RUMBLE

A bandicoot bash

The match was too close to call – 1990 to 1995 – but I wasn't keeping track. All that stood between my team and victory was a chubby crocodile with a vacuum. I danced and jumped around him as he used his big belly and Luigi's Mansion-like hoover to bounce me around like a loose piece of cat fluff. I just needed a few moments to deposit my Wumpa Fruit, and victory would be ours. I had my blinders on, and that was a mistake. The enemy team's Wumpa Fruit meter quickly filled to 2000, and the match was over. My team had been defeated, but I was still hungry for more of Crash Bandicoot's favorite fruit.

Crash Team Rumble, like Crash Bash and Crash Team Racing Nitro-Fueled before it, is a hectic multiplayer take on the famously difficult 24-year-old platforming franchise. It pits two teams of four against one another in a race to see which team can collect and deposit 2000 Wumpa Fruit first. It's a simple formula, enhanced by streamlined controls, that makes for a delightful bite-sized and competitive multiplayer experience.

That simplicity is one of Crash Team Rumble's most enticing features. There is a barrel full of DNA brought over directly from the mainline Crash Bandicoot series. Running, jumping, and attacking all feel like another run through Cortex Castle. Controlling Crash – or one of nine other starting characters from the franchise – feels wonderful.

You can enjoy Crash Team Rumble with these elements alone. All you need to know how to do is navigate around the map, collect Wumpa Fruit (either directly off the ground or by smashing boxes), deposit them into your team's capture point, and avoid any enemies who want to fight. You'll learn all that within seconds of jumping into Crash Team Rumble, but there is far more depth to unlock as you explore everything these fast-paced bouts of berry collecting have to offer.

A lot of the extra complexity falls to the wayside as you jump, claim gems, and use Dingodile's vacuum to hover in the air for a few seconds. The three character classes – scorer, blocker, and booster – can also sometimes shift to be little more than tidy organizational buckets, as any character can fill any role if used creatively.

Your team's needs will change organically as a match progresses, so you may need to do all three in a single game. Dingodile is classified as a blocker, although I found myself going after gems and boosting my Wumpa-collecting teammates instead of solely blocking for several matches.

The joy of single-player Crash Bandicoot games is all about execution. You have to learn every inch of a map to conquer and unlock all its secrets. It's easy to move on to the next level or to a new game once every box is smashed and boss defeated.

Even though Crash Team Rumble is built off part of the foundation of single-player Bandicoot games, the end goal couldn't be more different. The only bosses you defeat are other players, and it often won't be through perfect execution. It is messy, chaotic, platforming-filled matches that come down to the wire.

Abilities, gems, and relics add significant layers of complexity to Crash Team Rumble. Claiming multiple gems, usually three diamond-like platforms positioned next to each other, gives your team extra Wumpa Fruit for every deposited batch. Side abilities can be dropped almost anywhere on the map. Relics, also collected, can be used to unlock special stations all over the battlefield.

Outlining many of these abilities and relic stations would ruin part of the fun of exploring them. Unlocking a spiky-vine ball for the first time and rolling onto the enemy point like Miley Cyrus made me unreasonably happy, and you are likely to feel the same way when you discover some of these wacky tools. Various team compositions, map-oriented squad movements, and well-timed item usage lead to considerable strategic depth – so much so that some players may find it intimidating.

Those hours are incentivized like most modern multiplayer games. You unlock the full cast of characters and abilities as you play and earn cosmetics as part of the game's battle pass. While giving Crash a whole new wardrobe before you send him out to pick more fruit is rewarding, players who aren't looking for a battle-pass-driven multiplayer grind may succumb to frustration.

Crash Team Rumble could be viewed as the natural progression of difficulty in the Crash Bandicoot franchise. It takes an entirely different type of preparation and offers a different reward, though. Crash Team Rumble's take on multiplayer platforming madness is unique, with enough depth to keep you on your toes after hours of gameplay. Those searching for a fresh take on the long-running series should give it a try. **BY ARON GARST**

8

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One
STYLE 8-Player Online Action/Platforming
PUBLISHER Activision **DEVELOPER** Toys for Bob
RELEASE June 20 **RATING** E10+

STORY OF SEASONS: A WONDERFUL LIFE

An updated classic that hasn't quite caught up

Remakes and remasters are more common than ever in 2023. What's most interesting is seeing how these new versions handle the issue of completely rebuilding versus simply making modern visual improvements. Story of Seasons: A Wonderful Life is a remake of Harvest Moon: A Wonderful Life that straddles the line between these two philosophies fairly evenly but still delivers an outdated experience in various aspects.

Releasing on modern consoles, Story of Seasons: A Wonderful Life initially looks like nothing more than an updated re-skin on the surface. However, some significant changes have made it more inclusive for players. The customization suite is where the updated version exceeds its predecessor. Players can customize their avatars with gender-inclusive pronouns, body, and fashion options. Beyond that, none of the clothing or hair options are gendered either. You can combine any body type with any hairstyle or outfit you want. Once you settle on your name, look, and pronouns, you're ready to head to Forgotten Valley.

In what has become a staple of the farming sim genre, your character packs up and moves from the big city to the farm to live a quieter life. As you'd expect, you grow crops and raise animals whose products you can sell for profit. There are the usual four seasons in A Wonderful Life, and each lasts 10 in-game days. These days last 24 real-life minutes, which doesn't sound long but can start to drag the longer you play. Ideally, your daily loop includes tending your crops and animals, visiting the forest spirits to see if they have any new recipes for you, helping to dig at the archaeology site, fishing, foraging, cooking, and chatting with your neighbors around Forgotten Valley.

Getting to know the other residents of your small town is key, as the game insists that you must get married to one of the local singles by the end of your first year there. I appreciate that A Wonderful Life removes the gender-locked nature of the original game's romances, meaning players can marry any eligible single in Forgotten Valley, opening the door for queer romances.

That said, these relationships are disappointingly shallow. Since your courtship is barely a year long, you don't get much time to build an attachment to your future spouse. There are relationships already ongoing between some of the villagers when you arrive, which are then never really addressed if you decide to marry one of them. This takes away a potentially interesting element of small-town drama from the game and is also unsatisfying from a storytelling perspective.

In addition, in-game spouses don't have much that's novel or interesting to say once you tie the knot. After marrying Cecelia, she largely stayed in our house and repeated the same line about learning new things about housework over and over again. My young child had more unique dialogue for me than she did outside of cutscenes.

Unfortunately, the mechanics feel similarly shallow during your day-to-day loop. Doing your daily chores doesn't take long, especially once you start upgrading your tools. Chatting with the forest spirits is also a quick errand. Digging for artifacts can take as long as you want, but the process is slow and monotonous. The game encourages you to chat with everyone in town to help build your relationships with them, but their dialogue is often repetitive, and it takes almost no time to give them gifts from your inventory. Even fishing and foraging can be done while you do other tasks around Forgotten Valley.

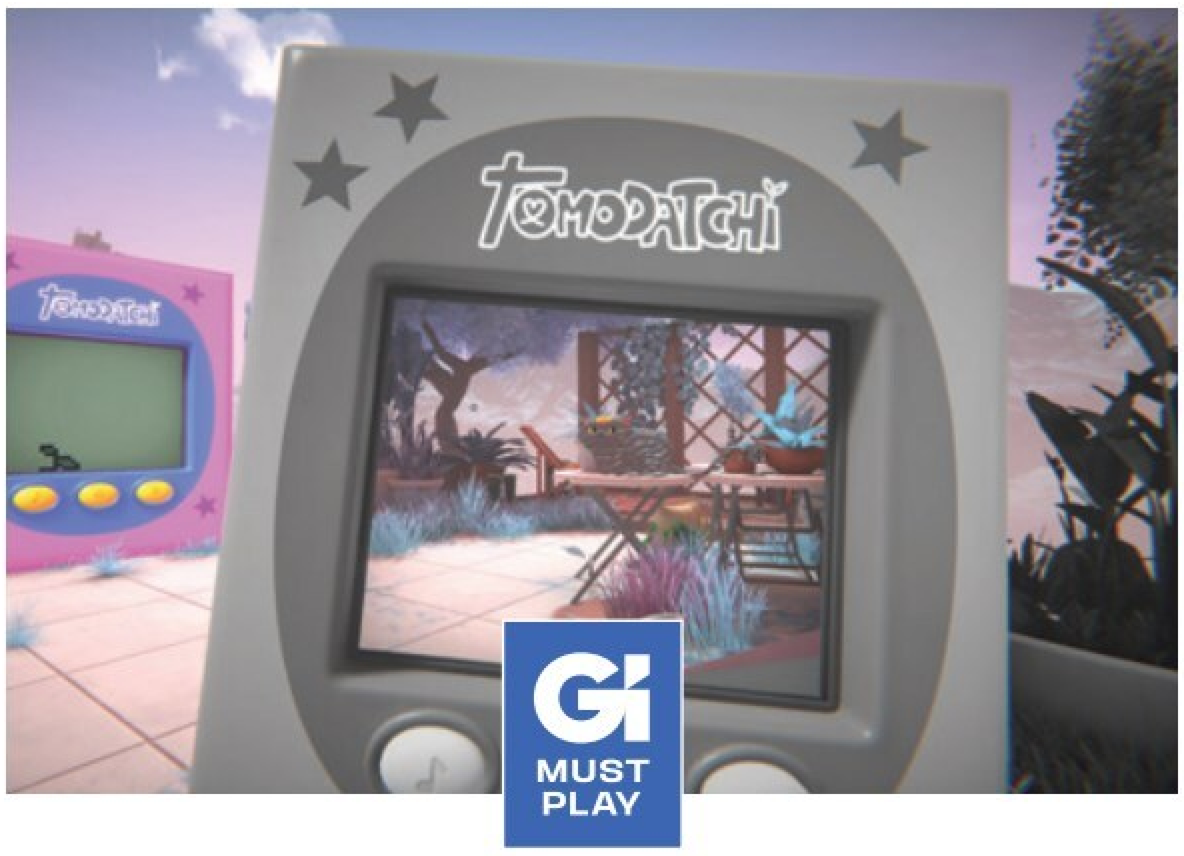
When the original version came out, I'm sure this seemed like plenty to do. But in the wake of games like Stardew Valley, this level of activity is underwhelming. It's easy to find yourself going to bed early to advance the calendar instead of utilizing every waking hour to maximize what you can get done. In theory, some of this time should also be devoted to cooking, but I often only used my kitchen when I really needed to. I only really paid attention to it when my character gave me the hungry icon, which usually seems to trigger when their Fullness bar is about one-third full.

This meter is somewhat emblematic of my overall experience of this game. Ideas that were once novel are outdated or uninteresting by today's standards. While Story of Seasons: A Wonderful Life is a welcome update to a classic farm sim, stripping away nostalgic fondness leaves you with an experience that feels lacking in the genre's modern landscape.

BY TY GALIZ-ROWE

6

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Simulation
PUBLISHER Marvelous
DEVELOPER XSEED Games, Marvelous
RELEASE June 27 **RATING** E



MUST PLAY

VIEWFINDER

The entirety of Viewfinder, including completing its optional puzzles, only takes a few hours, but its brevity is a strength. Every level feels like it is trying out a new idea based on the core concept making it a consistently novel experience throughout. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

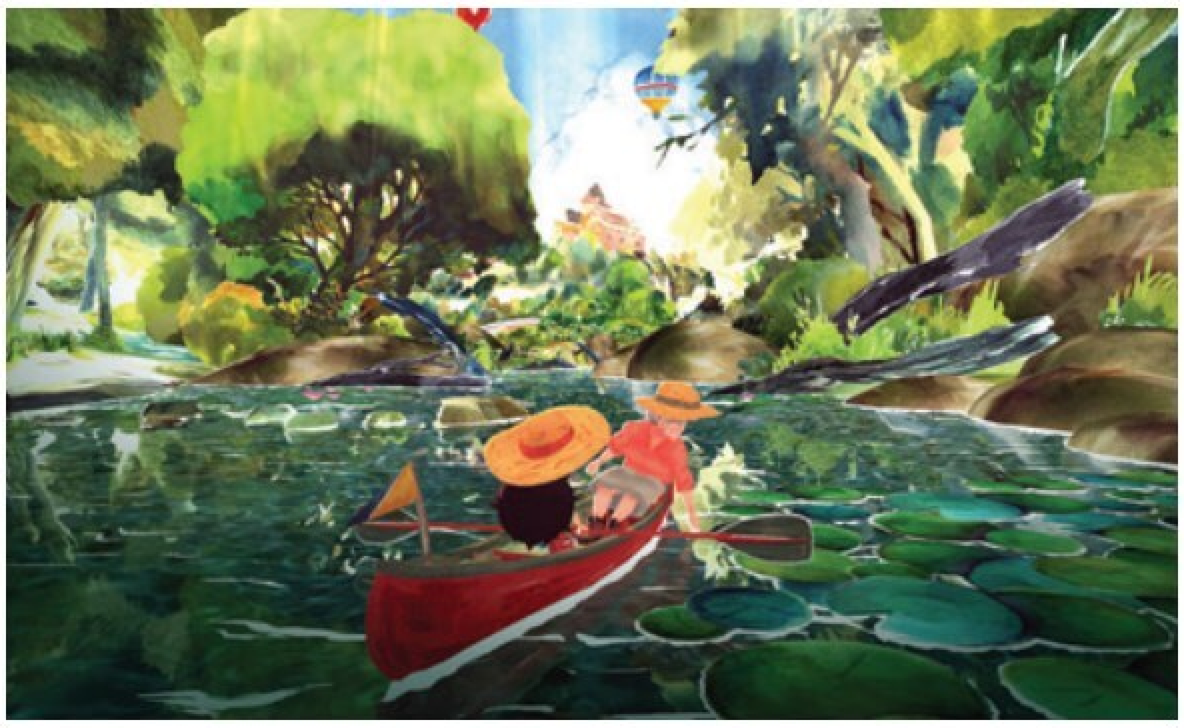
8.25

PLATFORM PS5 • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Puzzle
PUBLISHER Thunderful Publishing **DEVELOPER** Sad Owl Studios
RELEASE July 18 **RATING** E

DORDOGNE

As someone who derives real pleasure in admiring beautiful paintings, Dordogne ups the ante by letting me creatively interact with its gorgeous art. Even better, it layers a largely enjoyable tale on top of it. Like Mimi and Nora's relationship, there are some bumps to overcome, but good times await those willing to work through them.

BY MARCUS STEWART

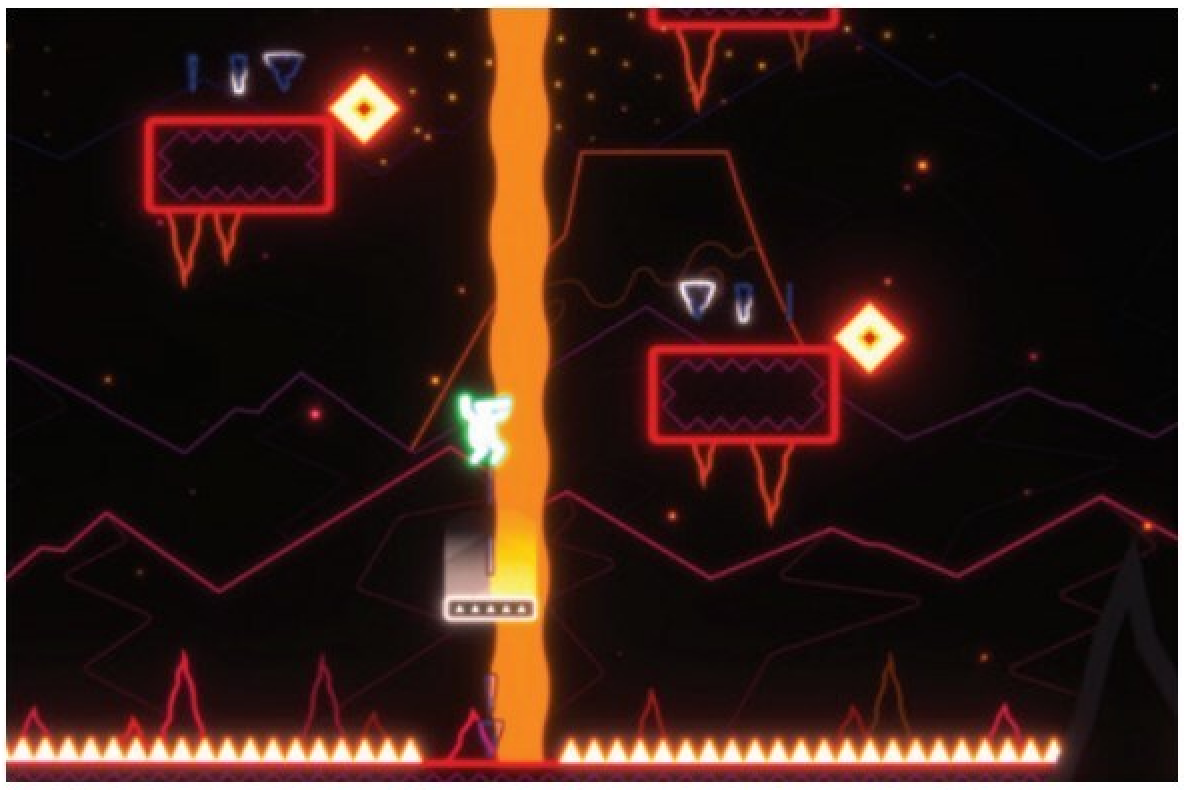


8

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** Focus Entertainment
DEVELOPER Un Je Ne Sais Quoi, Unanimation **RELEASE** June 13 **RATING** E

MR. RUN AND JUMP

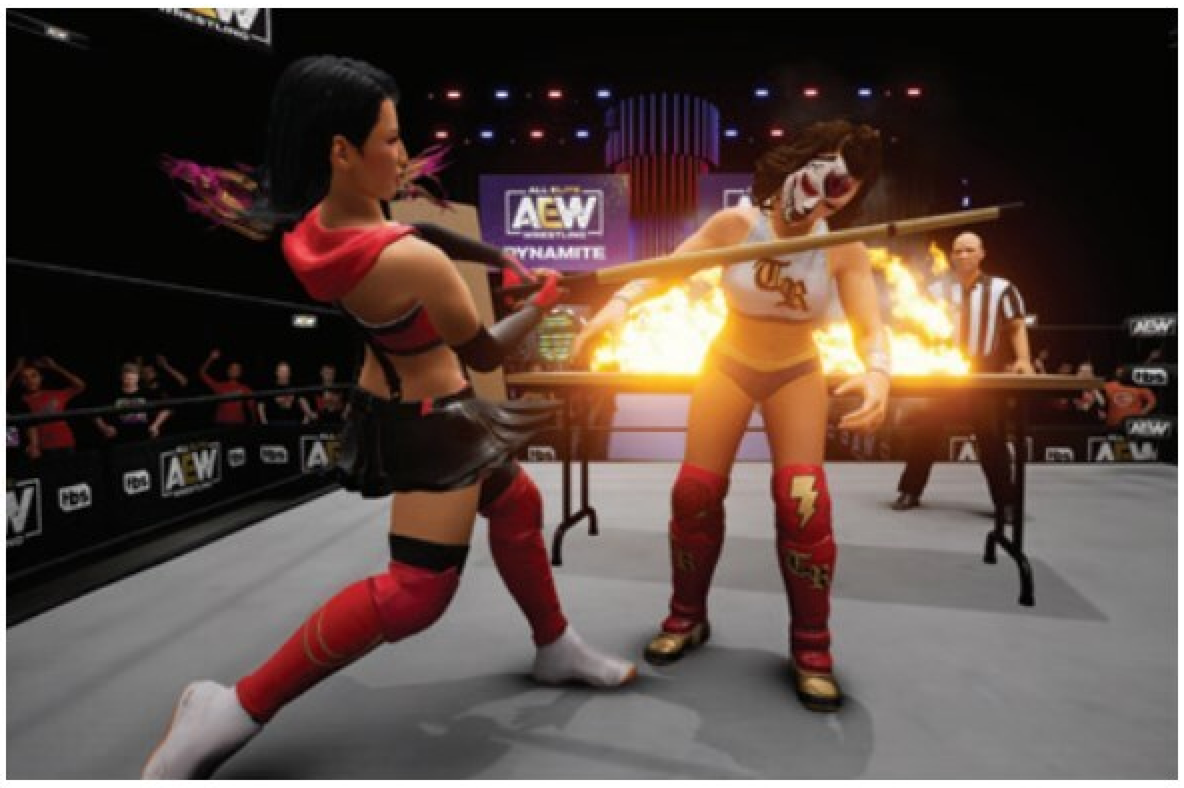
Mr. Run and Jump may look unassuming on the surface, but the challenges that await will have you screaming in frustration until they have you shouting in triumph. Though the trial-and-error style of each difficult room sometimes wore on me, after each success, I couldn't wait to see what hurdles I needed to clear next. **BY BRIAN SHEA**



8

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Platforming **PUBLISHER** Atari **DEVELOPER** Graphite Lab
RELEASE July 25 **RATING** E

AEW: FIGHT FOREVER



The gameplay has a strong foundation, and when it's firing on all cylinders, the action channels the simple fun of the '90s and early 2000s. The rest of the package just needs to catch up. Until it does, even the most passionate AEW fans may have a hard time sticking around for this main event. **BY MARCUS STEWART** ■

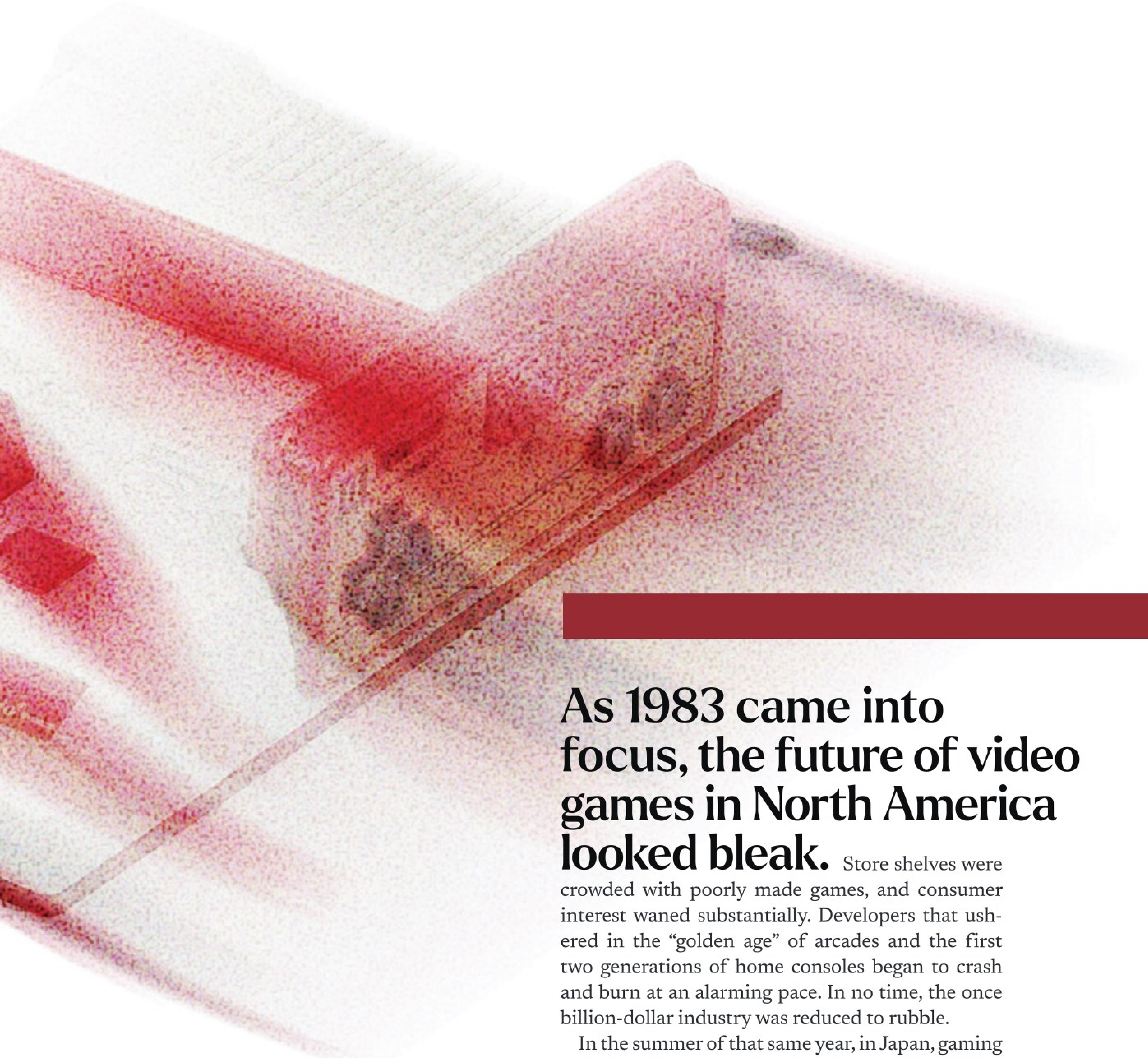
6.25

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1 to 4-Player Fighting (4-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** THQ Nordic
DEVELOPER Yuke's **RELEASE** June 29 **RATING** T

RETROSPECTIVE

Odd Origins

How the Famicom kickstarted Nintendo's strange ways **BY BEN BERTOLI**



As 1983 came into focus, the future of video games in North America looked bleak. Store shelves were crowded with poorly made games, and consumer interest waned substantially. Developers that ushered in the "golden age" of arcades and the first two generations of home consoles began to crash and burn at an alarming pace. In no time, the once billion-dollar industry was reduced to rubble.

In the summer of that same year, in Japan, gaming giant Nintendo released its first-ever home console with swappable cartridges. With its striking red and gold design, the Family Computer, better known as the Famicom, brought arcade hits like Donkey Kong and Mario Bros. into Japanese homes.

While the Famicom would go on to revitalize the North American gaming market as the VHS-inspired Nintendo Entertainment System, or NES, many of Nintendo's quirky games and accessories were forever locked in its home country. With the Famicom's 40th anniversary at hand, there's never been a better time to look back on the bizarre and surprisingly innovative experiments Nintendo unleashed on Japanese players throughout the console's celebrated run.

Famicommunication

Unlike the NES, the Famicom came with its two blocky controllers wired directly to the console. While one might think this tethered design was to keep players from losing controllers, it was actually a simple cost-cutting measure – one Nintendo would soon regret as more and more players sought out replacements. Aptly anticipating a future filled with wacky accessories, Nintendo also included a 15-pin connector on the front of the Famicom, ready for anything the future might hold.

The most surprising addition to the Famicom's original design was on the console's second controller – a minuscule microphone, complete with a volume slider. The microphone's inclusion was spearheaded by Nintendo Research and Development lead architect Masayuki Uemura, who felt younger players would enjoy hearing their own voices crackling out of TV speakers. Though his prediction wasn't exactly wrong, the Famicom microphone was notoriously underutilized by developers, mostly lending itself to a handful of iconic Easter eggs in single-player games.

While a few early titles did make use of the microphone, most Japanese players wouldn't be hollering into their second controller until 1986's The Legend of Zelda. The 8-bit masterpiece featured a slew of unique enemies for protagonist Link to defeat on his quest, but few so wily as Pols Voice. Depicted as blobby rodents with enormous ears, the instruction manual explained that the monsters "hate loud noises." With a deafening roar into the Famicom's microphone, which could only be found on the second player controller, all Pols Voice on screen would be thoroughly eradicated. This was a far superior method to attacking with normal weapons, as the enemies' nimble movements and high health made them especially annoying.

Strangely, the description of the Pols Voice hatred of loud noises was included in the manual for the English release, despite the fact developers had retooled the dungeon-dwelling baddies to now be weak to arrows. Zelda fans outside Japan wouldn't feel the thrill of shouting an enemy to death until 2007's Phantom Hourglass for the Nintendo DS, which allowed players to once again obliterate Pols Voice with a well-placed shriek.

Other notable examples of the Famicom microphone include Kid Icarus and the infamously difficult Takeshi's Challenge. The former allowed players to verbally haggle down the price of items with shopkeepers by yammering on about whatever they liked, while the latter, starring comedian, actor, and director "Beat" Takeshi Kitano (*Battle Royale, Violent Cop*), had players using the microphone for a variety of tasks, such as bringing up a map and singing karaoke.

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HVC-022
FAMILY COMPUTER DISK SYSTEM
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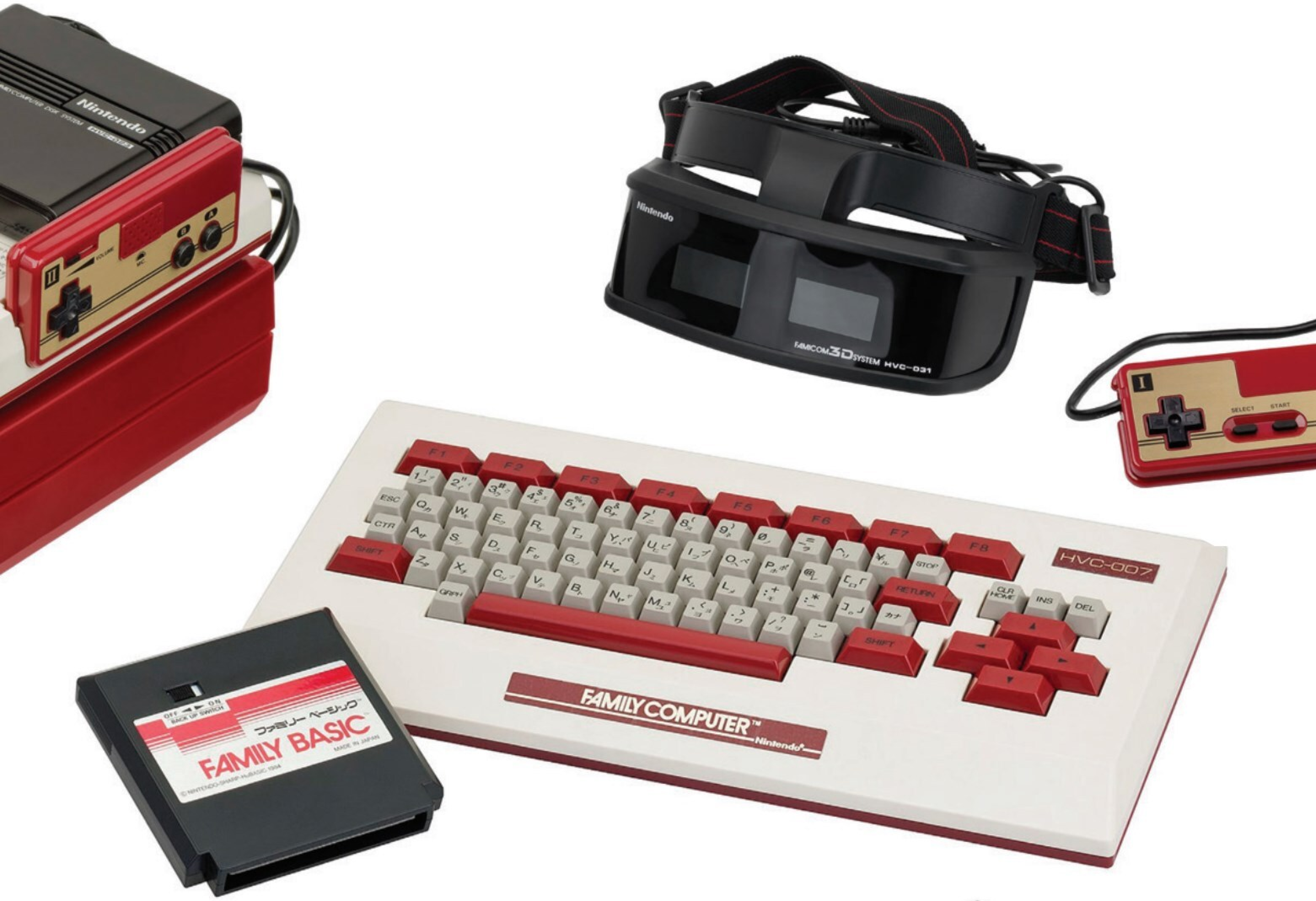
作動中

Famicomputing

When Uemura and his team were first tasked with designing the Famicom, they envisioned a gaming device with a 16-bit CPU, a keyboard, a modem, and a floppy disk drive. With costs considered, none of these superfluous features made it far into the planning stage, each launching as their own separate accessory in the years to come. The first to resurface, released in the summer of 1984, was the boxy Family BASIC Keyboard bundle, a collaboration between Nintendo, Sharp Corporation, and Hudson Soft.

Included with a taller-than-average black cartridge and a hefty user manual, the Family BASIC Keyboard and its accompanying software were intended for the blossoming home computer crowd. At the time, BASIC (short for Beginners' All-purpose Symbolic Instruction Code) was seen as the ideal programming language for novice developers and casual players alike. Family BASIC tried to make things even easier by including extra support for character sprites (including preset Mario and Donkey Kong models), backgrounds, controls, and music. Famed Mario composer Koji Kondo even got in on the action, penning a section in the user manual on how best to program chiptune melodies.

Though the bundle cost a hefty ¥14,800 at launch (the same price as the Famicom itself), the kit didn't come with a way for players to save their creations or share them with others. For this top-of-the-line feature, Nintendo suggested purchasing the Famicom


Nintendo
FAMICOM 3D SYSTEM HVC-031
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FAMILY COMPUTER™
Nintendo
OFF ◄ ► ON
BACK UP SWITCH
ファミリーベーシック
FAMILY BASIC
MADE IN JAPAN
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Data Recorder, a device that saved one's game directly to a standard cassette tape – for an additional ¥9,800. Ironically, sharing games and rampant piracy of Famicom titles had become a huge issue for Nintendo by this time. The problem got so out of hand that various media associations across Japan lobbied to update the Japanese Copyright Act, essentially banning all video game rentals countrywide. The ban, which does give individual developers the ability to allow rentals of their games (though they rarely do), still exists to this day. Despite its price point, the Family BASIC bundle sold well enough to warrant an updated sequel – Family Basic V3.

Nintendo even toyed with the idea of a keyboard for the NES, to be included in a never-released collection called the Nintendo Advanced Video System. Shown off at the 1984 Consumer Electronics Show, the NES keyboard was featured alongside prototype controllers, a joystick, a cassette recorder, and a zapper that looked more like a robotic wand than a gun. Amazingly, every accessory in the Advanced Video System was wireless, connecting via infrared technology.

FAMILY COMPUTER NETWORK SYSTEM
HVC-050
HVC-060
SELECT
START

Famicompatible

With the rental ban in full effect and piracy levels dipping, Japan's general gaming public was feeling the sting of video game pricing. Nintendo, hearing the grumbles of its audience, researched ways of producing a cheaper option than its colorful cartridges. Enter the Famicom Disk System – a floppy disk add-on that both plugged into the top of the Famicom and sat below it. Though introducing an expensive new accessory (one that cost more than the console itself) to promote cheaper games might seem counterintuitive, Nintendo did just that in 1986.

Similar to floppy disks of the time, the games for Famicom Disk System were housed in a hard plastic shell and dubbed "Disk Cards." Commonly produced in a brilliant yellow casing, the double-sided Disk Cards were impressed with a large NINTENDO logo at the bottom. This impression allowed Nintendo a form of physical lockout it hoped would help quell piracy. This wasn't the case, as many clever bootleggers produced their own case molds with the proper inlays, often springing for misspellings like NINFENDO and NINIENDO to trick the Disk Drive. Regardless of their manufacturer, Disk Cards were considered too fragile by most players and poorly designed, with many prone to errors due to dust buildup.

Though games for the Disk System were cheaper, the true appeal was the ability to download new titles to endlessly-reusable Disk Cards via one of the 10,000 Famicom Disk Writer kiosks found at toy, game, and hobby shops across Japan. The process cost a paltry ¥500 (¥100 extra for an instruction sheet), or roughly a sixth the price of purchasing a new cartridge-based title. Not only could players download new games, but they could use each store's dedicated "Disk Fax" machine to submit high scores directly to Nintendo for various tournaments. With player data in hand, Nintendo awarded tournament prizes ranging from Famicom branded stationary to gold Punch-Out!! cartridges, predating Mike Tyson's $50,000 deal to lend his likeness to the series.

FAMILY GAME

FAMILYCOMPUTER
ファミリージョッキー

Nintendo's hardware team was hard at work developing a different kind of add-on, one that would only work with the Disk System – 1987's Famicom 3D System. Unlike the well-known glasses-free 3D of the 3DS, the 3D System used shutter glasses and alternate frame sequencing to create an illusion of depth. While the effect worked, the system was a substantial failure, with only six games ever produced. The most notable was Famicom Grand Prix II: 3D Hot Rally, considered by many to be the first Mario racing game and precursor to the Mario Kart series.

With Nintendo pushing all its newest first-party games to the Disk System to boost sales, the peripheral soon became the only way to play era-defining hits such as The Legend of Zelda, Castlevania, and Metroid, as well as Japan-only cult favorites like The Mysterious Murasame Castle and the Famicom Detective series. Despite their longer load times and flimsy housing, many consider Disk Card games a step above their cartridge counterparts, as the Disk System allowed for save features and a much richer audio experience. Though Nintendo would eventually return to cartridges with the Super Famicom, the Disk System was still a respectable success, with 4.4 million units sold in its four years on the market.

Famicommerce

In North America, many think of the Sega Dreamcast as the first home console with online connectivity. But in Japan, every single Nintendo home console, from Famicom to Switch, had some form of internet compatibility. It all started in 1988 with the release of the infamous Famicom Modem,

another clunky add-on, brimming with potential, that struggled to find a long-term audience.

The idea for the Famicom Modem came not from a desire to let players connect and play games together, but rather from something more dull – the stock market. As Famicom flourished, financial service company Nomura Securities approached Nintendo about using the system for people to check on stock prices in real-time and possibly even buy, sell, and trade stocks at home. Working closely with Nomura Securities, Uemura and his team developed a modem that worked with an online service dubbed the Famicom Network. Like the Famicom Disk System before, the Famicom Modem was plugged into the top of the console, allowing players to insert credit-card-sized cartridges for different types of transmissions. Lacking a dedicated keyboard, a special controller with a full number pad was included to help users navigate the number-centric software.

In July 1988, a test run of 1,500 prototypes produced outstanding results. With the Japanese stock bubble growing larger by the day, more and more investors were obsessed with checking market prices and making trades on the fly, an ideal situation for Nintendo. Unfortunately, this success soon evaporated when the Famicom Modem hit store shelves two months later. Nintendo was shocked to find its circuit system was unstable, leading to widespread circuit failure, and many users were less than thrilled with the modem's cord-heavy set-up. Coupled with the inevitable burst of Japan's stock market bubble in 1989, most were left uninterested in the add-on's specific services – even those who owned it.

While the Famicom Modem flailed, Uemura and his team still tested the system's gaming capabilities. Five prototype games were developed, the most prominent based on the ancient board game Go, but all were deemed failures in the end. "We were unable to realize our dream of using the modem to augment Famicom games," Uemura told *Nikkei Electronics* magazine (via Glitterberri blog) in 1995. "The game would require players to be connected to the phone line for an extended period of time. If the problem of data transmission fees wasn't enough, we were also faced with the risk of users monopolizing the phone line."

The modem's saving grace, outside of providing horse racing bets and results to diehard fans, was its ability to let toy and game stores share an online database. By inserting the Super Mario Club cartridge, stores could post reviews and communicate sales to one another, sharing what games were top sellers. Nintendo could also peek at this database, allowing the company to better understand the market consumer demand.

As with most of its promising technology, Nintendo toyed with releasing the Famicom Modem in the United States with a slight twist. If Japanese users could place bets on horses through the Famicom, Minneapolis-based company Control Data Corporation was confident American users could use an NES Modem to play the lottery. In 1991, with Nintendo on board, Control Data announced its plans to test a subscription model, wherein users could pay $10 a month to play all Minnesota-based lottery games via their NES. Unsurprisingly, it wasn't long until the concept of adding unsupervised gambling to a home console aimed at children raised a few eyebrows in parent groups and the political sector – squashing dreams of an NES Modem before its initial tests ever began.

JRA-PAT
FAMILYCOMPUTER NETWORK SYSTEM
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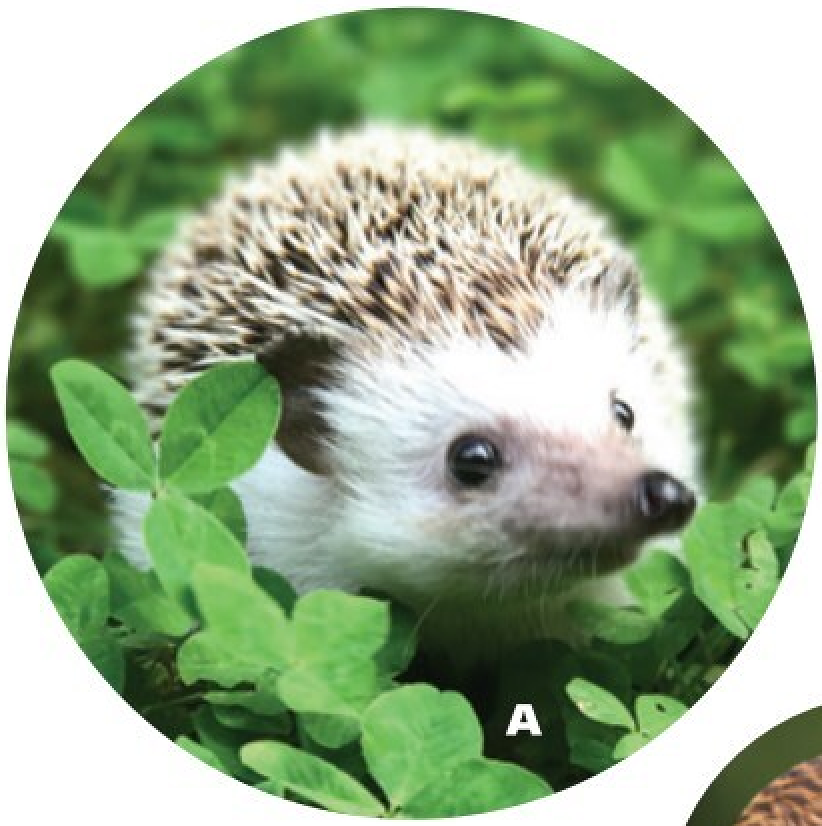
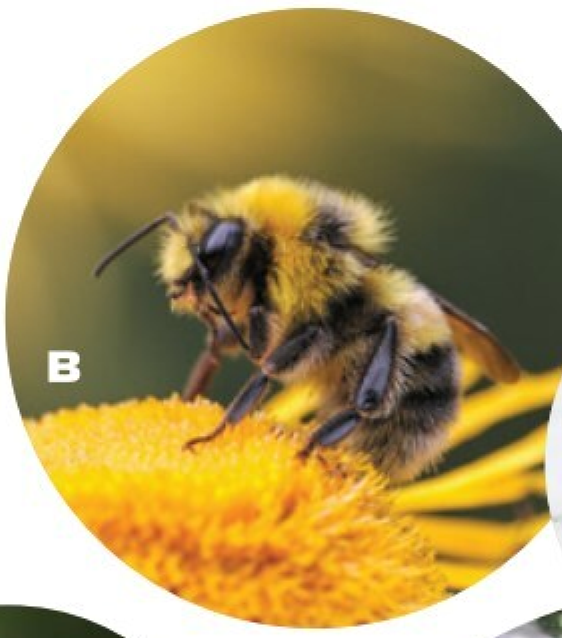
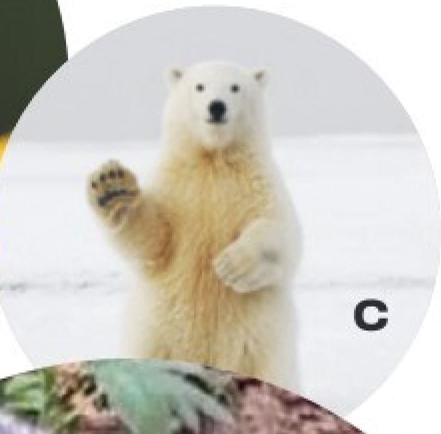
It's easy to look back on the Famicom and focus solely on its iconic games, but looking deeper into the hardware and accessories that give it personality helps bring its influence and legacy into perspective. Like today, the Nintendo of the 1980s was willing to aim its resources towards innovative and silly concepts, striving to find the next niche in the gaming market. It stumbled from time to time, but there's no doubt that even its failures brought a sense of wonder and joy to thousands of players along the way. ■

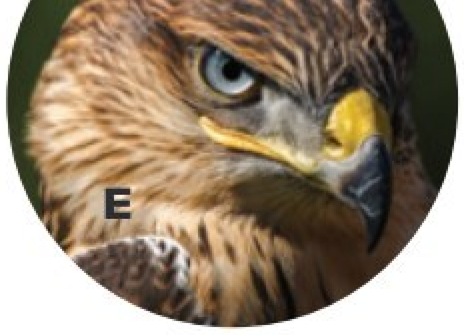
SONIC IRL

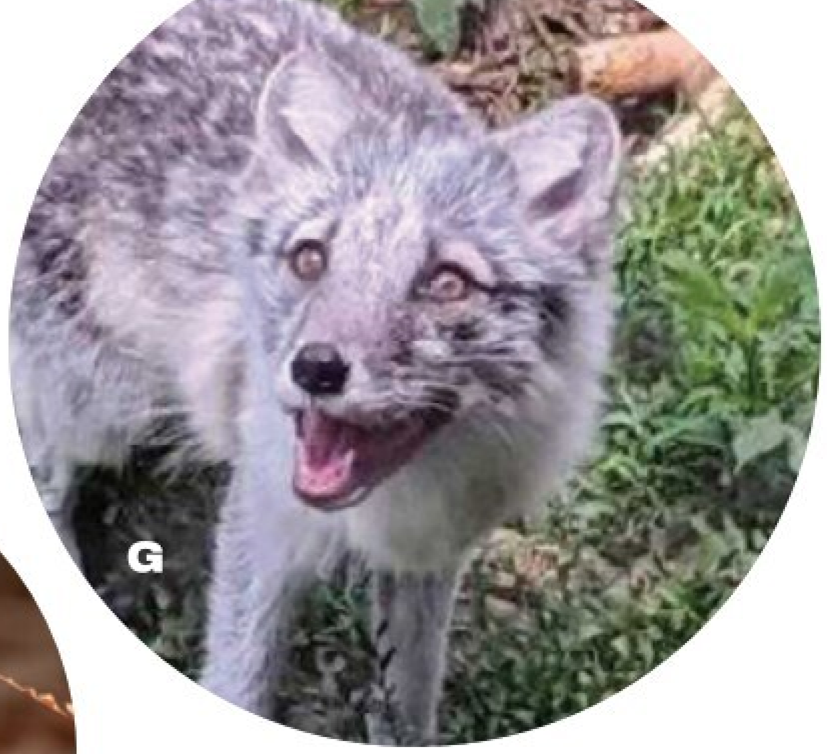
BELIEVE IT OR NOT, Sonic and his buddies are based on real animals. Shocking, we know, but it can be hard to tell which kind by looking at some of them. As cool as the Sonic cast looks, the reality is often disappointing; we all felt the same pang of childhood disappointment seeing a real, decidedly not blue hedgehog for the first time. How many Sonic characters' real-life counterparts can you recognize? Match them up down under. **BY MARCUS STEWART** ■

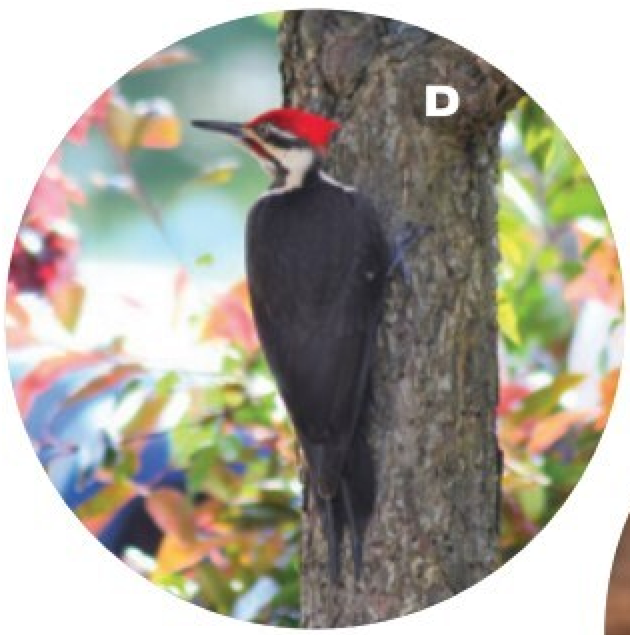


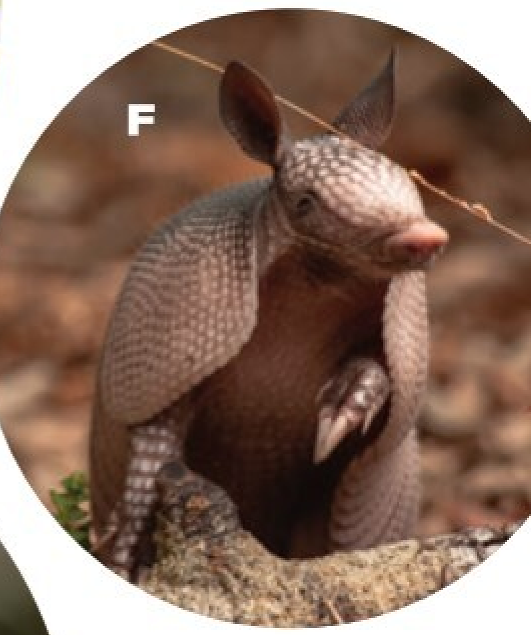


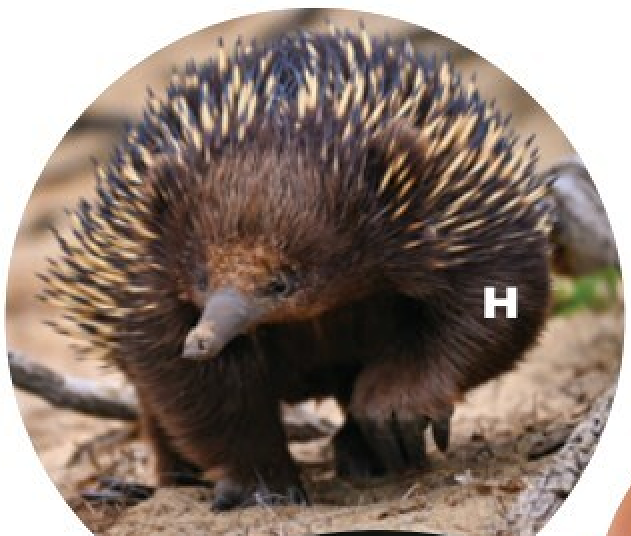


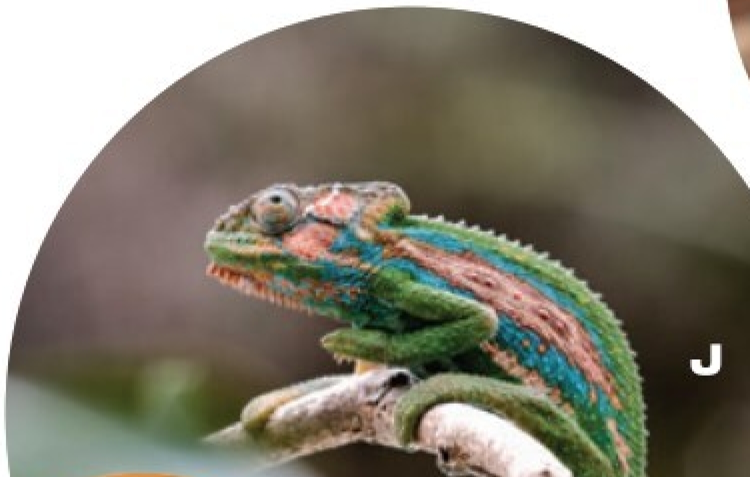


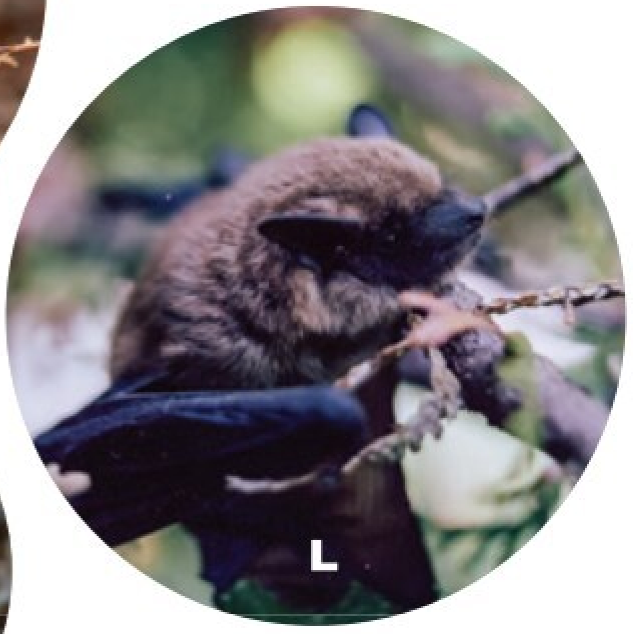


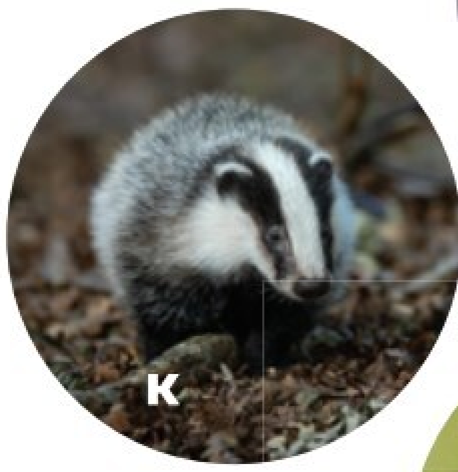


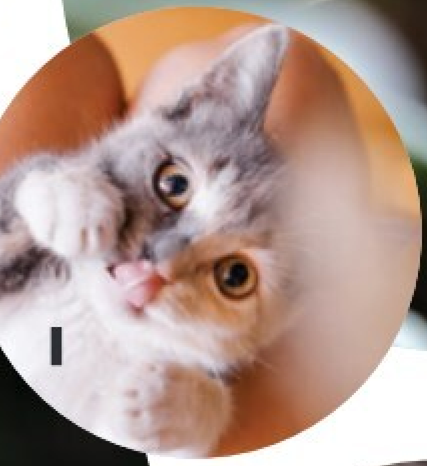


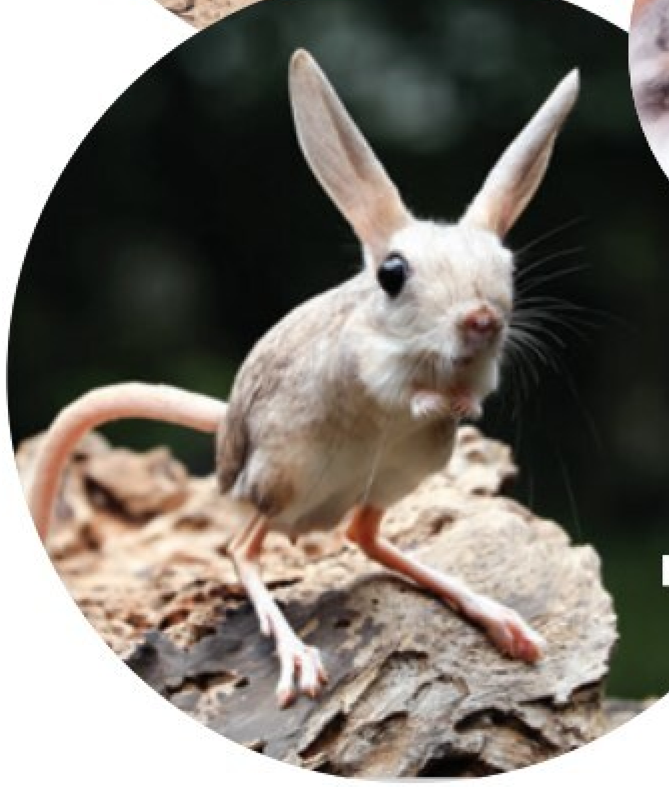


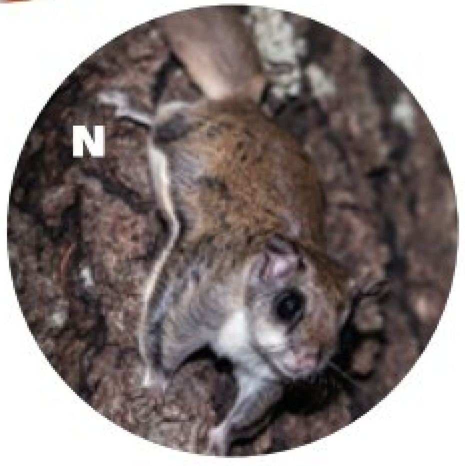


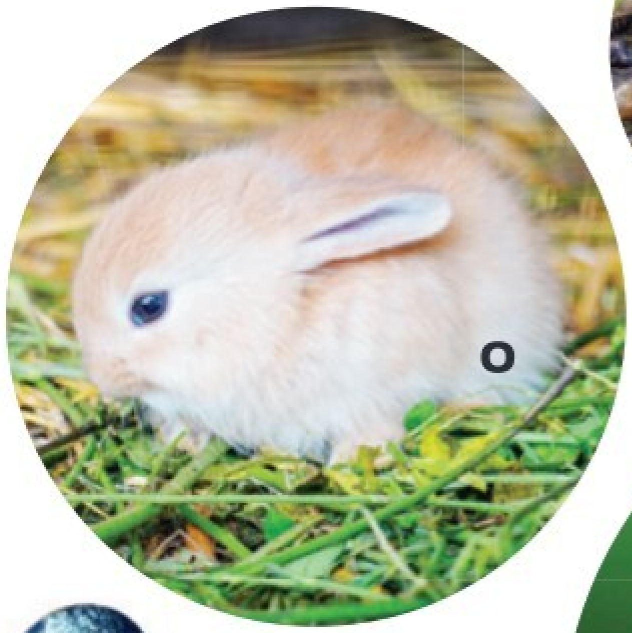


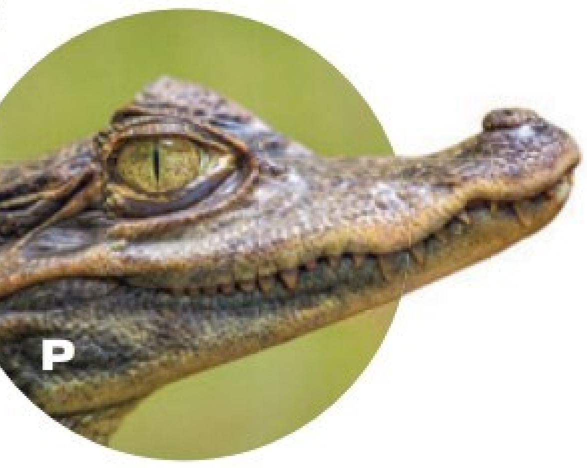


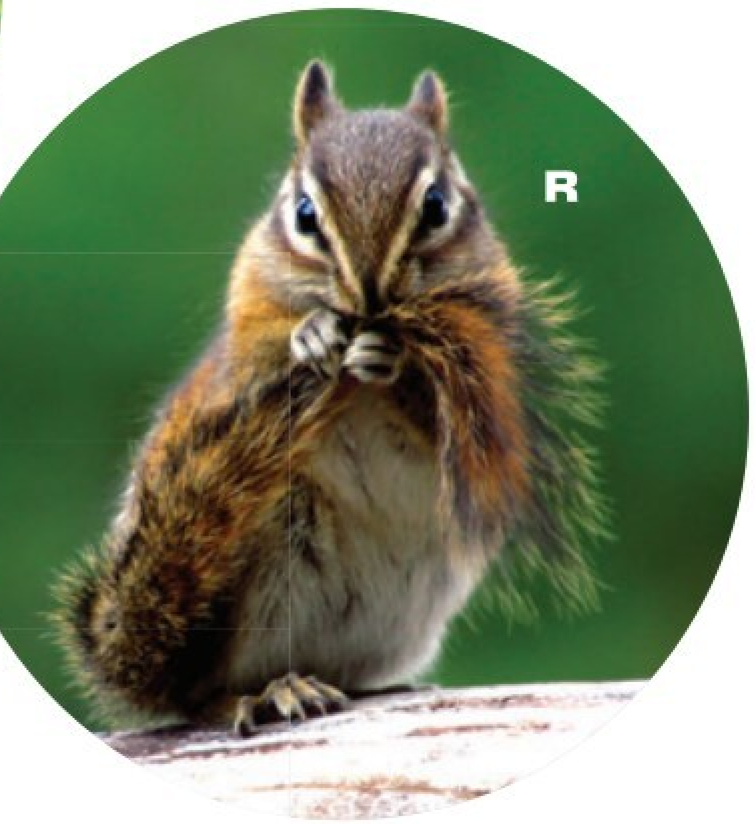


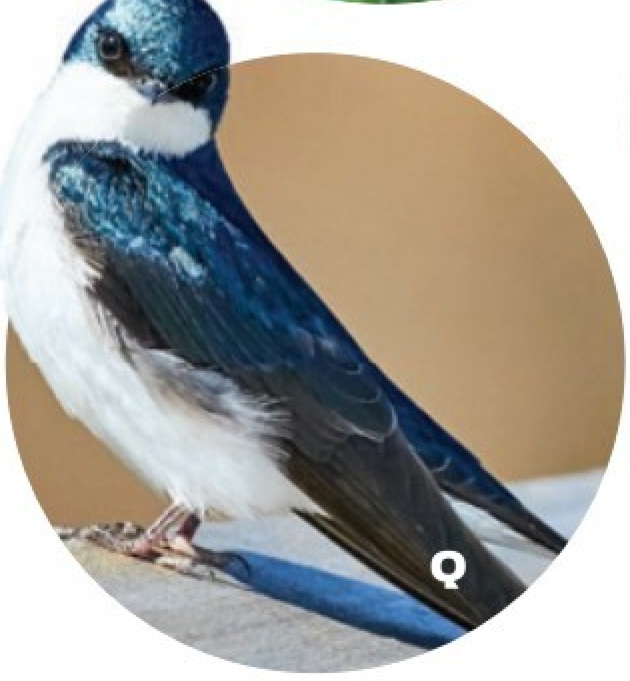












1. ___ Sonic *(Hedgehog)*
2. ___ Tails *(Fox)*
3. ___ Knuckles *(Echidna)*
4. ___ Vector *(Crocodile)*
5. ___ Charmy *(Bee)*
6. ___ Espio *(Chameleon)*
7. ___ Blaze *(Cat)*
8. ___ Rouge *(Bat)*
9. ___ Cream *(Rabbit)*
10. ___ Sticks *(Badger)*
11. ___ Sally Acorn *(Chipmunk)*
12. ___ Mighty *(Armadillo)*
13. ___ Ray *(Flying squirrel)*
14. ___ Bean *(Woodpecker)*
15. ___ Fang *(Jerboa)*
16. ___ Bark *(Polar Bear)*
17. ___ Jet *(Hawk)*
18. ___ Wave *(Swallow)*

1-A, 2-G, 3-H, 4-P, 5-B, 6-J, 7-I, 8-L, 9-O, 10-K,
11-R, 12-F, 13-N, 14-D, 15-M, 16-C, 17-E, 18-Q

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